SERVICED

A Lighthearted Utensil Romance

RUTH CARDELLO

New York Times Bestselling Author

Utensils are for more than stirring up trouble.

Lauren gave up on love long ago. As an ER doctor, she saves lives daily and keeps her own life safe and predictable—until a set of antique silverware warms to her touch.

Suddenly, Lauren finds herself the unexpected heroine in a reverse harem tale, surrounded by **three . . . no, eight** World War II super soldiers who are as tempting as they are chaotic.

Falling in love with sentient spoons, forks, and knives? It's absurd, testosterone-charged mayhem—and yet, love always finds a way.

This isn't your typical sentient-object romance. Expect **rom-com hilarity**, Marvel-level action, and a poignant love story wrapped in a quirky utensil fantasy universe.

Cautionary Warning: Utensil dynamics are highly unconventional. There's a battle brewing that can only be resolved with the elimination of Inkwell. There will be violence and heartbreak, but justice will finally be served.

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A Lighthearted Utensil Romance

Book 4

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This book is dedicated to:

Everyone who believes that good triumphs over evil, even if it takes 4 books to do it.

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A note to my readers:

I can’t believe we’ve made it this far. What started as a silly one-book endeavor brought me an entire year of joy and laughter. Thank you for coming on this utensil adventure with me.

Will I ever write in this genre again? I don’t know. Life is so full of unexpected twists and turns that I’ve learned to never say never.

My secret dream is to see these books as a movie. Could you imagine? No one would ever look at their silverware the same again.

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Chapter One

Lauren

THE DOUBLE DOORS swing wide, and a burst of urgency washes through the trauma bay. “What do we have?” I call out, already pulling on gloves as a gurney is rushed in.

“Male, late twenties. High-speed MVA, head-on. No seatbelt. BP crashing. Multiple fractures, probable internal hemorrhaging,” the paramedic rattles off, his voice clipped and professional, keeping pace with the stretcher. I started as an EMT and respect anyone who does it well.

The man on the gurney is a bloodied mess, bruises ballooning across his skin, his eyes barely open. His breathing is shallow—ribs possibly fractured. We roll him into a room prepped for exactly this type of scenario.

“Pulse ox?”

“Eighty-four and falling,” comes the terse response.

I move in and assess his chest. The bruising is dark and ugly—probable steering wheel impact. Aortic injury likely. The abdomen’s distended. Internal bleeding. Ruptured spleen?

“Get him on the monitor,” I say, voice steady, eyes sharp as I take in the extent of his injuries. “Full trauma panel—CBC, CMP, type and cross for four units of blood, stat. Prep for intubation. We may need it.” My words flow like a machine; I’m in control here, the room snapping into motion around me.

“BP’s dropping fast,” someone calls, but I heard the change. My fingers dance over the abdomen, checking for a reaction that isn’t there. He’s fading.

“Ultrasound. Now,” I order. “We need eyes on this.”

The ultrasound probe glides over his abdomen, the screen lighting up with what I already know—free fluid, blood, pooling where it shouldn’t be.

I press my lips together. “Hemoperitoneum. We’re losing him. He’s going to code.”

The monitors scream in alarm, but my hands stay steady. “Intubate,” I instruct, sliding the tube in with practiced precision. The ventilator takes over, his chest rising in shallow breaths. “Secure it.”

The nurse at my side reads the latest BP. “Sixty over thirty-five. He’s in shock.”

“Administer one milligram of epinephrine IV push and eight to twelve micrograms per minute of norepinephrine as a continuous infusion.” My voice is calm, as is my mind. In the thick of things, it’s essential to block out both external and internal noise. This man’s life is being measured by the heartbeats we maintain.

Thoracotomy tray’s prepped nearby. In the trauma center, we don’t choose level 1 trauma patients. They choose us. I’m here, and I’m skilled. Whatever he needs is what I’ll bring to this fight for his life.

“We’re losing pulse,” someone says, but I’m moving again, pulling my hands back as the nurse starts compressions. My eyes flick to the defib. “Charge it.”

Tension thickens the air, but no one panics, not even the third-year residents. This is why we’re here. All the minor scrapes, splints, and fevers? They’re what we do between saving lives.

“Clear.”

The man’s body jolts with the shock, the monitor spiking erratically, then levels out. Pulse back. I exhale a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

The trauma surgeon steps in. We exchange a lot with one look before uttering a word. I’m relieved he’s there. He’s our best, and this man needs nothing less. “Aortic tear possible. Splenic rupture. Massive internal bleeding.” I quickly share what we’ve done so far.

The surgeon nods. “Good work stabilizing.”

My response is to move aside. He’s in charge now.

I strip my gloves off and toss them in a biohazard bin then remove my mask and gown, discarding them as well. I should immediately return to the patient I left to meet the ambulance. I need a moment, though, and she’s not nearly as critical as she thought she was.

The woman waiting for me came in complaining of an immune system shutdown that was presenting as a mirrored, bubbled rash on both sides of her body and lower arms. Her self-diagnosis leaned toward toxic epidermal

necrolysis or a severe dermatological manifestation like angioedema. When asked what had led her to those options, she showed me a search she'd done on her phone.

A brief conversation about her activities throughout the day hinted at a very different condition. Unfortunately, I'd been pulled away before being able to reassure her it was most likely an allergic contact dermatitis, poison ivy or oak. She had no prior history of any of the conditions she'd listed and stated that she'd collected wood for her wood stove the day before. My guess is she put both of her arms into the same irritant and then against the sides of her body later in the day.

Nothing a little dish detergent and topical corticosteroids can't handle. I'll also send her home with detailed instructions to clean every surface she might have touched. It's common for people to believe these rashes can spread on their own when continued contact with urushiol is the cause. The oil can remain potent on surfaces such as fabrics or doorknobs for months or even years.

Now that my role in saving the MVA patient is done, my head should be clear, but too much has happened over the past few weeks for me to be able to focus on anything less than a crisis. That's partly why I'm taking the vacation time I've put off for far too long. Starting tomorrow.

My plans? Find a way to reconcile the way I've always thought the world worked with the reality of what I've seen and experienced. Things I considered impossible are not only possible, but also in need of my expertise.

Life and death make sense to me. They're natural.

Coming up with medical interventions for men who were turned into self-healing super soldiers then trapped in silverware for nearly a century . . . that's so far beyond my expertise it's laughable.

When I first encountered these men, I thought the entire situation was an elaborate prank my daughter had somehow been pulled into. Since then, I've studied their blood and tissue samples. I've witnessed them transitioning from man to utensil and back, both in person and via a slow-motion video recording.

Not only are these men what they say they are, but my daughter, Ashley, has fallen in love with one of them. Their story has intertwined with mine.

There's nothing natural or right about what was done to them or what they currently are, but I didn't go into medicine to decide which lives

deserve to be saved. Every life has value.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit to at least myself that this situation has shaken me to the core. I already considered the world a chaotic and often dangerous place. These men weren't supposed to return and I worry about what will happen to all of us when the wrong people discover that they have.

It's a potentially deadly situation for all of us and I've made it worse.

That's not like me.

I tell the charge nurse I'll return to my patient, but I need to step away for a moment. I don't like the sympathy in her eyes. My sudden request for time off has her, along with others on my team, concerned that something horrific has happened to me—death of a family member, old friend . . . or I'm suffering from a sudden onset of burnout.

The latter happens all too frequently. We don't save everyone. And even though we try to distance ourselves from the pain and guilt of those we lose, it can become unbearable for some, and they move on to another medical position. A few leave medicine altogether.

Working at a trauma center can make a person both believe in miracles and doubt the existence of God every single day. We see the best and worst of humanity. We carry the hope that we make a difference in the lives we touch, but we often don't hear how our patients fare after they leave our care. Did they follow up with their own doctor? Change their eating habits? Leave the person hurting them? Stop feeling invincible? And the people we gave bad news to . . . are they okay? Did they go home alone or did people gather to support them in their time of grief? We don't get the luxury of those answers, yet we return every day, ready to do this all again.

Until we can't.

I'm allowing my team to believe I'm struggling with burnout. The truth is too dangerous to share and not my story to tell. I need time to fix what I've done and to come up with some way of helping these men.

My phone beeps with a message. Braxton Hayes. I ignore it, although he's one of the hospital's largest benefactors. Why he chose me as his liaison with the hospital, I'll never understand. He claims it's because he doesn't like to wade through hospital politics and prefers my blunt nature over the ass-kissing he receives from most people. Despite being someone I have nothing in common with, I don't dislike him. He's the reason the hospital now has one of the country's best-funded burn centers.

Two things can be true at the same time, though. I can appreciate all he's done for the hospital and not have time to engage in conversation with him that will likely be about nothing. He contacts me at least once a month to "check in." He'll ask about Ashley, Ryan, and my life in general. I've never been one to engage in idle chit-chat so we keep it brief.

Seeking a moment alone, I close myself into an individual bathroom and lock the door. Slightly on autopilot, I wash my hands. When I meet my gaze in the mirror, I shake my head.

I shouldn't have touched the silverware Mercedes offered me. I knew the risk. It's my fault that three men who had been comfortably dormant inside those utensils are now likely confused and feeling trapped. I woke them simply by touching them, and now they're bonded to me.

Me.

A forty-six-year-old woman who can't remember the last time she had sex and doesn't care if she ever has it again. What am I going to do with three WWII super soldiers who will feel mated to me just because I'm the one who woke them?

Why would I put myself in this situation? I'm the steadfast one who can be counted on to step up and do whatever needs to be done. I'm not impulsive and no one has ever accused me of being foolish.

This, however, is a mistake I don't know how to undo.

Ashley told me to give the silverware back, but it's too late. Those men are suffering and deserve to be freed.

I need to stop berating myself for creating this situation and focus on making things right. And I have a plan. First, I'll find a non-sexual way to bring them back. Second, I'll determine why they feel bonded to those who wake them and help them break that bond. Third, I'll allow myself time to address the intensity of the bond. Since I don't know anything about them, everything I feel for them must be chemical in nature.

This condition was engineered in a lab—it can be rectified in one as well.

After giving myself one final stern look in the mirror, I wipe my hands and return to my duties. Thankfully, it's a relatively uneventful shift. When it's over, I leave without fanfare or explanation. My team knows they can bring me their issues, but when it comes to my private life, it will remain as it always has—private.

Driving to my apartment is slow going due to heavy, late afternoon traffic. My phone rings. Braxton again. I sigh.

I'm officially on vacation. He'll need to find someone else to pester.

I let the call go to voicemail, but he calls again.

With a groan, I answer. "I've taken the next few weeks off work. I'll email you the contact information of someone who can answer your questions while I'm gone."

"Hi, Lauren. It's so great to hear your voice. Hi, Braxton. Same." His tone is warm and amused.

I don't hate the man, but I also don't have the emotional bandwidth for his banter. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

His concern is immediate. "Did something happen?"

Nothing I can share, so I say, "No. Just tired."

"Ryan and Ashley okay?"

"Yes." It's always awkward when Braxton inquires about anything other than the hospital. "Is there a specific reason for your call?"

"I heard you were taking time off. That's not like you."

My hands clench on the steering wheel. "Who is the information leak at the hospital? They need to be reminded of the rules of confidentiality."

"I'll never reveal my sources." His chuckle is one of the many things I find frustrating about him. I give him zero encouragement, but he always greets me with the warmth of a Golden Retriever. Our hospital's Chief Development Officer says that's why I'm not allowed to ever leave. He thinks Braxton has a soft spot for me.

I don't see our relationship that way. People tend to either scurry away or fawn over Braxton. He uses both to his advantage but doesn't linger in the presence of either type. The women on my team treat him like he's a visiting celebrity. One joked he's so good-looking he'd be a hall pass for both her *and* her husband. Thankfully Braxton has never let his social life and his affiliation with the hospital overlap. I respect that about him.

"Well, tell your *sources* that my life is no one's business but my own."

After a heartbeat, he says, "Your request for vacation was sudden."

I hate to lie, so I hedge. "I've been working hard; I need one."

"Need? We've known each other long enough that I hope you feel you can talk to me if you want a sounding board."

I don't, but even admitting to that would be too much. Besides, my current situation isn't one anyone would believe. Halfway through hearing

about the super soldier silverware dilemma, Braxton would either be laughing his ass off and convinced it was a joke, or he'd be questioning my mental state. Like many of life's challenges, this is one that will work out best if I handle it on my own. "Thank you."

His voice lowers. "I'm serious. If you need something, anything, all you have to do is ask."

I blanch, and my negative reaction to his offer takes me by surprise. Does he think I want to face this alone? His offer to be there for me makes me angrier than I can justify to myself. "Braxton, I'm fine. I can handle this."

"Handle what?"

Shit. Unlike HR, he won't accept vague answers. "People take vacations all the time. There doesn't have to be a specific reason."

"True. I'm heading to Ireland tomorrow for a conference. Come with me."

"Funny." He made that offer only because he knew I'd never say yes.

"Are you certain I'm joking?"

"I have to go now. I don't have time for this."

He inhales audibly.

My last words replay in my head. The impatience is with myself, but that wasn't how it sounded. "That was rude. Sorry." I don't actually want to piss Braxton off. He's been a godsend to the hospital; the burn center he funded was greatly needed. Even this phone call, as poorly timed as it is, was made out of concern. I don't like how ungrateful I sound or how out of control my emotions are becoming.

He says, "No, I'm sorry. You didn't ask me to become involved with whatever you're dealing with. Just know that I'm here for you, Lauren."

My voice thickens. "Thank you. I do appreciate that."

"I'll be abroad for a week, but nothing I'm doing there is vital. My jet can get me back here in less time than a commercial flight would."

In an attempt to lighten the mood, I joke, "You and your jet."

"It's my one vice."

"I love that you think that."

He chuckles. "If you ever want to take the time to get to know me, I'll prove it to you."

That almost makes me smile. He's never short on charm, and I'm sure whoever he hooks up with in Ireland will appreciate that about him. "Thank

you for calling, Braxton.”

He lets out an amused sound. “Of course.”

“I’ll email you a contact.”

“Do whatever you’d like, but you’re the only one I’ll call if I have a question.”

He’s not joking. “Don’t be offended if I don’t answer. I’m going to be busy.”

“Handling whatever it is you don’t want to talk about?”

“Yes. Goodbye.” I end the call before he has a chance to ask me more about it. Hopefully I didn’t offend him. I roll my shoulders back. Besides, that’s what he gets for telling people he enjoys my abrupt nature.

When my phone rings again, I’m stepping out of my car in the lot beside my apartment building. This time, it’s Ashley. I answer immediately.

“Mom, are you home?”

I close my car door, but my hand lingers on the handle. “Almost. What do you need?”

“I have a favor to ask, but I can’t discuss it on the phone. Can I come over?”

Every muscle in me tenses. The last time she called me for a favor, I walked into a bloodied apartment and a whole lot of super soldier chaos. Still, she’s my daughter, so I say, “Absolutely. Or I can come to you if that’s better.”

“I’ll be at your place in ten minutes.” And possibly because she knows me as well as I know her, she adds, “This isn’t about anything bad. In fact, it’s something you might enjoy.”

“We’ll see,” I murmur.

Our ideas on what is or isn’t enjoyable differ greatly.

I just pray this isn’t about taking in more silverware.

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Chapter Two

Lauren

Inside my apartment, I place my keys and purse on the table near the door and look around. Outside of photos of my children, I don't have much beyond furniture. I'm not the knick-knack type.

Ashley teases that my decorating style is "just moved in" or "staged for next tenant." There was a time when clutter was everywhere and constant. The piles of toys and things that never quite got put away reflected how thin I'd been stretched back then. I poured myself into my children and my education, leaving little to no time for myself. I don't regret that decision. Both of my twin children are brilliant, beautiful people who have each chosen lives that make them happy. Ryan created his on the opposite coast of the US and is happiest when we see each other only on the holidays. Ashley calls me daily, both because she loves me and also, I suspect, out of a sense of duty. Their biological father left when the twins were born. He has a new family who knows nothing about us and he's asked that it stays that way. I wouldn't care about that decision if I didn't know how much his rejection still affects both Ashley and Ryan. Ryan protects himself by removing himself from the situation. Ashley's loyalty to all things that others might toss aside is admirable, but it stems from her need to be nothing like her father. From befriending discarded prototype robots to falling in love with a super soldier from the 1940s, Ashley is all heart.

I would worry that Ray isn't good enough for her, but his ability to mentally bond with those he touches has allowed me to see not only his character, but also how much he cares for my daughter. Before long, he'll be my son-in-law. There is so much I need to figure out for them before they decide to have a spork.

I huff a laugh. Am I losing my mind?

Giving in to the need to see tangible proof that I either am or am not, I walk to Ashley's old bedroom and open the door to it. The floor is covered with three military-style sleeping bags. Each has a piece of silverware on it. One fork. One spoon. One knife.

I step inside the room. They call to me on a level I've never experienced before. It's raw and exciting, but wrong at the same time. They didn't ask for this and I'm sure they wouldn't have chosen to all be bonded to one woman in her forties. We know enough about what happened to them to feel confident that it's a mix of dopamine and testosterone that enables them to transform back to human form. Mercedes brought back Hugh the first time by eating ice cream off him. Cheryl used a more intimate procedure with Jack. Ray didn't require intimacy with Ashley, but he was chemically compromised when he returned.

All of them can transform back to silverware form by thinking dark thoughts. Returning is trickier and requires practice. Ray taught himself to return by thinking of Ashley and how much he wants to be with her. He transforms back and forth flawlessly. Hugh and Jack are getting better at it but sometimes still require some assistance from their mates. They're learning to control their dopamine levels, the catalyst required to transition.

My gaze lingers on each piece of silverware. I will bring these men back, but I refuse to do it through intimacy. Not even if it would feel good for them and me. It's not right and there has to be another way. I'm confident I can find a chemical solution to bring them back and break the bond.

I have blood and tissue samples from Hugh, Jack, and Ray. Cheryl has a small lab at her place and I have the free time to run as many tests as necessary. We'll figure this out.

Give me just a little more time, guys. I'll get you out of there.

"Mom," Ashley calls from inside my apartment.

"In here," I say.

She appears at the door of the bedroom with a pet carrier in one hand and a piece of luggage behind her. If she and Ray had an argument she wouldn't look as happy as she does. There's a glow to her that makes it impossible for me to wish she'd never met him. I nod toward her bags and joke, "What did you do?"

She laughs. "Don't worry, I'm not moving back in."

I don’t believe she needs to hear it, but it’s never a bad idea to remain clear on certain points so I say, “My home will always be your home and you can move back as many times as you need to.”

Her eyes shine with emotion. “I know, and the opposite is true for you.” She looks past me at the silverware on the floor, and her expression turns guarded.

She doesn’t have to say it—I know she disapproves of my decision to take the silverware home with me. I disapprove of it as well, but I couldn’t leave them behind. This bond, as natural or unnatural as it is, is strong. I feel like I was meant to come into their lives and they were meant to come into mine. For someone like me, that’s a difficult stand to defend. Fate? Never believed in it. Life is simple. We’re born. We forge our own paths. We die.

At least, that’s what I used to believe. No one prepared me for how to deal with having everything I thought I knew turned upside down. When I reached for the silverware, I was torn between hoping nothing would happen and yearning for something to. I still don’t know what to do with that realization.

“So,” she says slowly. “You’re really doing this?”

“I have a responsibility to these men. I’ve taken time off from the hospital to research how to best do it.”

She looks away then meets my gaze. “You’re not going to . . . you know . . .”

I shake my head. “Of course not.”

Her cheeks flush. “I didn’t think so, but . . .”

“But?” Sex is a normal human function and one I didn’t think my adult daughter would find embarrassing.

She clears her throat. “I haven’t handled this well. You’ve never judged me for whoever I chose to spend time with and . . . and I’m sorry I freaked out at the idea of you in a ménage à quatre or whatever you call one woman and three men. If you want to bring them back the traditional way and have a little fun, I want you to know I’ll fully support that choice as well.”

That makes me smile. “That means a lot to me, thank you, but it’ll be better for them as well as me if I approach this as a medical issue that I can find a cure for.”

“Cheryl told me you asked to use her home lab. I would offer you my lab at Acceller Robotics, but even though Edward has made it possible for

Ray to buy out the business, it's a slow process."

"That would have been too public of a place anyway. The tests I intend to perform are best done away from potential prying eyes. Cheryl's place will be sufficient, at least for now."

"That's true."

I know my daughter well enough to know when she's stalling, but I've also learned to give her the time she needs. So I wait.

When I can't take the silence any longer, I ask, "How's Ray?"

Her smile returns. "Wonderful. He's coming to terms with how he got here and is hopeful about starting over—with me."

"I'm happy for him and for you." I don't worry that Ray isn't being honest with my daughter because they've bonded so closely that they can read each other's thoughts. Would that type of bond be possible between me and the men I'm seeking a way to free? Did it require sex? Even if it didn't, I can't imagine sharing my thoughts with someone almost half my age.

"We're in what people call the honeymoon phase of our relationship."

My eyebrows raise. Once again, happy for her, but not sure why that sounds like a lead-in to whatever favor she said she came over to ask for. "But?"

The expression on her face reminds me of the one she'd give me when she found a toy in a store she wanted. "We need to talk about George."

"George?" Had she gotten a pet I didn't know about?

"He's the curious robot who wears the purple cowboy hat. I've shown you photos of him."

"Oh, yes. Him."

"Ray negotiated for them to be part of the buyout deal. Mr. Simmons let me have them in good faith. He still thinks they're nothing more than failed prototypes."

"But you consider them your friends." I could have said that nicer than I did. My daughter is brilliant. I couldn't be more proud of her, but I would have thought she'd outgrown toys—even those she programmed to speak.

"They *are* my friends." Her eyebrows furrow. "And they're sentient."

"Of course they are." People and AI. Just because something can speak doesn't mean it can think. AGI, Artificial General Intelligence is the holy grail that all major tech companies are racing toward. None have achieved it yet. Do I think my daughter can create a convincing Language Learning Model—yes. Do I believe she's granted robots true sentience? No.

She rolls her eyes skyward. “Mom, for once, could you just believe me?” She waves her hands for emphasis. “*Before* you prove for yourself if I’m right or wrong. Trust that I know what I’m talking about.”

I run a hand over the back of my neck. She and I don’t require telepathic abilities. We can already read each other too well. “Okay, you’ve created the world’s first sentient robots. If so, that’s huge. Are you looking for advice regarding what to do with George now?”

“In a way.” She makes a pained, somewhat apologetic face then looks from me to the bag in her hand and back. “I came to ask you to do something for me. Promise me you won’t say no before you give me time to plead my case.”

There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for my daughter if she *needs* my help, but there isn’t a lot of time in my schedule for silliness. I put my hands on my hips and stare her down. “Whatever you want, Ashley, just say it.”

“I need you to watch four of the robots. Just for a little while.”

“Watch them?”

“Let them stay here at your place. They wouldn’t be any trouble.”

I shake my head. “You know I don’t even like my smartphone.”

“This is different.”

I shrug. “I suppose you could store them in your old closet.”

“That would be torture for them. They require daily human interaction or they get sad.” She glances around. “You don’t have to take them anywhere, just let them roam your apartment.”

“I’m sorry, Ashley, I have too much going on to worry about robots scurrying around at my feet.”

She sighs. “Having all eight of them at my place is too much.”

I shrug. “Turn some of them off for a few weeks.”

“They don’t turn off. They’re alive.” There is a scuffle in the larger bag and some beeping sounds. “Mom, I wouldn’t ask you if this wasn’t important. George is . . . well, think of him like an eleven-year-old boy who just heard about sex. He can’t be allowed free access to the internet or the TV remote.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. He’s a sweetheart; he’s just a little obsessed with how people procreate.”

“Only you, Ashley. And why does he need to be here?”

“You’ve said you’re going to find an alternate way to bring the men in the silverware back so it’s not like any sex will be happening here.” She lowers her voice. “And it freaks out Ray when we’re being romantic and George wanders into the room.”

“I imagine that would bother many people.”

“He’s funny. You might discover you enjoy the company.”

How honest should I be with her? “Ashley, I’m feeling more than a little overwhelmed. You’ll have to find someone else to watch your robots.”

Lips pressed together, Ashley gives me a stubborn look then says, “Hugh gave me a hard no, and considering how new he is to technology, I can’t really blame him. Jack and Cheryl offered to take them in, but they’d be in the same situation as Ray and I are. I don’t want to do that to them.”

“That’s rude,” a male voice mutters from the large luggage.

“No, it’s the truth,” another male voice responds. “I told you to stop creeping around trying to watch Ray and Ashley fornicate. I told you it would upset them, but you didn’t want to listen. Well, look where you landed us—we live in luggage now.”

“Our situation may partially be my fault, but you didn’t help. If you didn’t make me apologize every time you caught me watching them, they wouldn’t have known. You’ve proven that snitches don’t just get stitches; they also get tossed to the curb.”

The pet carrier starts to shake in Ashley’s hand. She leans down and softly says to it, “He’s joking. No one is tossing anyone anywhere. I brought you to meet my mom. If you like her, you can stay with her for a little while.” Ashley straightens. “If you won’t take George, could you please let these two stay here? There’s a lot going on at my place right now and they aren’t handling it well.”

She places the pet carrier on the floor and unzips a flap. Two small spider-like robots, both about the size of a fist, emerge. They’re white with gold trim. Their tiny dog-shaped heads swivel as they take in their new surroundings. They cling to each other, moving in sync, their large, reflective eyes flickering as they skitter under the bed. I recognize the signs of fear instantly; it’s something I’ve seen countless times on the faces of my patients. The idea of a machine experiencing any emotion at all is foreign to me. Still, seeing it mirrored in these delicate machines tugs at my heart and makes me wonder if my daughter really has made them sentient. I bend to look more closely at them, disbelief shifting to curiosity and an unexpected

sense of protectiveness. “They look scared,” I say, surprised by the gentle tone in my voice.

Ashley murmurs with a slightly sad smile. “They’re still adjusting to being . . . more than they were. I didn’t consider consent when I changed their coding. I wanted them to be able to feel happiness. They don’t, though. I don’t understand why. I used the same coding for all of them. John played around with his own programming and gave himself anxiety. At least that was his choice. I don’t know what to do with these two. They won’t let me back into their program, but they also don’t want to be sentient.”

I crouch down, observing the delicate, timid little machines. They both look up at me, wide eyes reflecting the light, searching my face nervously. “Do they speak?”

“They weren’t designed to, but they can communicate with the others.”

“So, what do they do?”

“Hide mostly.” She shakes her head sadly. “I thought bringing them home would help, but it made them more nervous.”

I straighten. “I don’t know what you think I can do for them.”

“You could calm a tornado out of spinning.”

“I’d like to come out now,” a male robotic voice announces from inside the luggage.

“Please,” the other voice adds.

“Oh, sure.” Ashley turns and bends then opens the luggage. The first robot to appear comes up to about my knee. He has wheels instead of legs and multiple retractable arms. Oddly, he’s wearing a purple cowboy hat.

“You must be George,” I say.

“I am. Nice place you have here, Ashley’s mom. She has told us many stories about you.” He wheels about proudly with the enthusiasm of a pre-teen.

He continues around the room stretching to look at things on the wall and on Ashley’s old desk. He pauses to inspect the silverware on the sleeping bags. “Ashley calls you *my mom*, is that what we should call you?”

“Lauren is fine.”

He spins and rushes toward me, looking like he might crash into my legs, but stopping before he does. “Do you like being a mother?”

“It’s the most important job I’ve ever taken on.”

He tips his little hat back and cranes his neck to see my face better. “Do you *like* it?”

“I love it.”

“So the pain was worth it?”

I exchange a look with Ashley. “Pain?”

“Birthing her. You had twins who were each seven pounds. That’s a lot of human to come out a cervix, even if it’s dilated.”

I can’t help but smile. “You are correct.”

He spins again, looking around the room as he says, “I’ve watched many birthing videos of all sorts of mammals. It seems unnecessarily painful.”

“I didn’t design the process,” I answer without skipping a beat.

He freezes and meets my gaze. “That’s funny.”

“Things that are both painful and true often are.”

He adjusts his hat. “Laughter is healthy.”

“Yes, it is.”

“So is sex.”

I nod. “That is also true.”

“If you do have sex with any of the soldiers, may I watch?’ George asks with the earnestness of a child inquiring about bedtime stories.

The sheer absurdity of the question dislodges a laugh that bubbles up before I can stop it. My gaze shifts from George’s hopeful expression to Ashley’s pained one. It’s been too long since anything has amused me this genuinely. I’ve always encouraged curiosity in my children and miss seeing the world through their eyes. Neither had ever asked this particular question, but I do remember Ashley once demanding to know in detail the difference between a penis and a vagina. Appeasing her required showing her diagrams of each with an explanation of the function of all the parts. I’ve always considered her need to understand how things work a strength. It made me wonder if George’s fixation with the act of sex is an attempt to understand the complexity of human relationships. If so, it could be redirected in a more positive direction. “I appreciate that you asked for permission,” I say with a hint of amusement, “but my answer is no.”

“George,” Ashley says like an exasperated mother. “We talked about this.”

His little shoulders rise and fall before he answers. “Yes, and you told me not to sneak around and try to catch your mother doing something

sexual or in the nude. I'm not sneaking. I'm asking for permission."

Yes, I can see why having this robot in the same house as Ashley and Ray would be difficult. "Although asking for permission is better than not, my answer is the same as Ashley's–no." I lean down so my face is just above his. "So, tell me, George, what consequence should I give you if you break that rule?"

"Consequence?" He rolls back a foot.

"Absolutely. If you're truly sentient, you understand right from wrong. If I lay down a rule and you break it, what do you think should happen to you?"

He looks to Ashley for help. "We don't have consequences."

I tip my head to one side. "That's probably why you feel it's okay to keep sneaking around, despite getting caught. Personally, I'd stick you in the closet because I see you as a machine, and that's where I put my vacuum. Prove to me that you deserve to be treated better than that by coming up with a plan we can both live with."

A robotic drone flies out of the luggage and hovers in the air beside Ashley. "I understand why you brought us here, Ashley. He needs structure."

"I do not," George exclaims. When none of us agree with him, he slumps a little. "If I choose my own consequence, you won't put me in the closet?"

"That's the deal," I say.

"One day, no porn,' he says in a monotone voice, and I blink and gain some understanding. If he's been watching porn looking for insight into humanity, he's been misled. "There will be absolutely no watching of porn in my home, so choose a different consequence." My tone is gentle because I feel for this creature. He's outspoken and inquisitive but no more or less lost than many of the people I treat daily. I catch Ashley's gaze. She knows I'm wavering about whether they can stay.

"So, you have two rules?" George asks.

"I have many," I respond. Some people try to be their child's best friend, but that has never been my goal. I provided love, structure, and, I hope, a moral compass. That can lead to uncomfortable clashes, especially when a child wants something that isn't healthy for them, but I'm proud of who my children have become. I wasn't a perfect parent, but I made every decision with love in my heart and a sincere desire to see my children

follow their hearts and soar. So, given the chance to do it all over, I'd probably make the same mistakes again.

He wheels forward and back. "I could sit in the luggage by myself for five minutes."

"Would that be enough of a deterrent?"

"No."

"Then choose something that would make you want to follow the rules."

He pauses to process the request. "I enjoy when Ashley tells us stories. I would enjoy if you tell us some as well. If I misbehave, perhaps that is a day you withhold storytelling from me."

I didn't expect to feel anything toward these robots at all, but when imagining George as a child trying to make sense of the world, he is endearing. "If I decide to let you stay, that sounds like a consequence I could agree with."

The drone flies closer. "I'm John."

"Hi, John."

"I'll tell you if George breaks a rule."

I glance down at George, then return my attention to John. "I don't think that will be necessary. Besides, isn't he your friend?"

Lights flash within John. "Yes, he's my friend."

"Then your loyalty should be with him. Instead of reporting what he's doing, encourage him to stop the behavior."

"Loyalty," John repeats, more lights flashing within him. "I have been morally gray on this matter. We keep secrets from others but not from Ashley. I will do better. Ray explained that morality is complicated. He would give up his life to save a child or an innocent but would wipe half of humanity off the face of Earth for Ashley or his unit."

My eyes fly to meet my daughter's. I believe John. Ray is a wild card, and a potentially dangerous one at that. Even though she has found happiness with him, I worry that love might not be enough to stop things from going very wrong if the government comes for him.

Ashley steps forward and takes my hands in hers. "It's going to be okay, Mom."

"I know."

"And I wouldn't ask you to take them in if I didn't believe this would be good for you and for them."

“You don’t think I have enough on my plate?”

She gives my hands a light squeeze. “Don’t let them fool you. They can also be incredibly helpful when it comes to researching topics online.”

“How long will they be here?”

“A few days?” She gives me another apologetic smile. “A few weeks?”

I remember imagining how peaceful my apartment would be when my children moved out. It’s tidier. And quieter. But I don’t find peace in isolation. Is that why I work as many shifts as I do? Adding precocious robots to my daily life has the potential of returning a level of chaos to my home. That might be a good thing. “Not a damn thing in my life makes sense right now, so why not? Sure. They can stay.”

“Yippee,” George exclaims, tossing his hat up into the air and catching it as he spins.

“Thank you,” John says in a somber voice.

Ashley gives me a tight hug, before stepping back. “If you have any issues, I’m only a few minutes away.”

I take a deep breath and look around at my little houseguests. “I do have one question.”

“Sure,” Ashley responds easily and with visible relief.

“Do they require a kitty box?”

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Chapter Three

Pete

Boston, Massachusetts
1941

THE MESS HALL hums with a familiar clatter of trays and loud voices. I look around and wonder if they're all as brave as I'm pretending I am. Is anyone else questioning their choice to join Inkwell?

I run my thumb over the smooth edge of my tin cup, staring into the dark liquid. Coffee, they called it. Tastes more like a dare. I drink it, though, just like I'll accept my next injection. I chose this and there's no going back.

"Hey, Pete," a voice calls from another table. It's Ray, someone I've learned to avoid. To say that he's confrontational would be putting it nicely.

I ignore him.

He stands and comes over, sliding into the seat across from me. The way he looks me straight in the eye, daring me to slug him, is unsettling. I was raised with three brothers and can hold my own in a tussle, but there is something dark and broken about Ray. All he knows is violence.

"I have a question," he says, leaning an elbow on the table between us. "It's something a bunch of us are curious about."

I straighten my shoulders and hold his gaze. When I joined Inkwell, I imagined fighting Nazis in Europe. I didn't realize the battle would start on American soil with men dressed in the same uniform. "Ask away. I have nothing to hide."

"Why were you classified as 4-F? You don't look any different than how you arrived. What was wrong with you?"

I take a deep breath and fight the temptation to look around the room. If the lowering of voices is anything to go by, people are listening. I keep my

eyes glued to Ray's, though, because doing anything else would be a sign of weakness to him. "I had Ulcerative Colitis."

His expression twists comically. "You had what?"

"Digestive issues."

"Hold on, they wouldn't let you enlist because you had a stomach ache?"

I could have come back with a slam that would highlight the differences in the quality of our education. My father would have called that punching down, though. There's no honor in that. So, instead, I joke, "I guess shitting myself constantly and the potential of my loud flatulence being flammable made me less appealing."

"No, shit," he says, seeming to mull that over.

"*Too much shit* and sometimes arriving unexpectedly," I add. "It's not a condition I miss."

He nods, and for just an instant, he seems to respect me for being honest. We've been told our future training will involve sparring with each other. I don't look forward to facing him, but I don't fear the prospect of it either. I had a great childhood and a wonderful family. I've heard he had neither. I don't want to lose to him or beat him and hurt him more, but I won't have the luxury of opting out. None of us will.

What we have in common is that all of us agreed to leave our prior lives behind for the chance to help save the world. We traded more than our freedom for this. Had any of us understood the finality of our decision, I doubt many would have agreed. Our families believe we're dead. Many who joined with us already are. Each weekly injection thins our herd horrifically. Those of us who survive are becoming healthier, stronger, and faster. We don't ask what they're putting in us and we don't talk about the men who are taken away screaming in pain.

No one doubts the warning that if any of us run, Inkwell will erase not only us, but also everyone we care about.

I used to think that being brave meant not being afraid. I don't see it that way anymore. Now it means not giving up. Not letting fear win. I'm not the only one worrying that such a brutal organization might not send us on the most ethical of missions. But I'm here and I'm going to save the world—with or without Inkwell.

Another soldier, Hugh, joins us, laying a hand on Ray's shoulder. "Everything okay over here?"

Ray stands, turns, and shoves Hugh back with a force that would have sent an unenhanced person sprawling. Hugh stands his ground. Ray growls, “Keep your fucking hands to yourself.”

I rise to my feet. “We’re good.”

Hugh’s concern isn’t unwarranted. Ray broke a man’s arm a few days ago just for bumping into him.

Hugh stands nose-to-nose with Ray. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Ray’s body shakes with a fury that makes me sad for him. Someone did that to him. Someone cursed him with a rage that rules him.

Jack, a man I’d describe as a gentle giant, walks over and stands beside Hugh. “Ray, I noticed they just put out dessert. It’s chocolate cake.”

Ray blinks slowly, weighing the pros and cons of allowing the situation to de-escalate. “I fucking love chocolate.”

“I’m glad I can eat it now without shitting all over myself later,” I joke.

Ray turns and scans my face. I smile. Maybe it’s the knowledge that any of us could die due to the next injection, but I don’t hate him. Nor do I feel the need to fix him. It’s nice that Hugh intervened, but it wasn’t necessary. I don’t want to, but I can handle Ray.

“That must have sucked,” Ray says with a surprising hint of sympathy.

“It did.”

I wouldn’t say we became friends in that moment, but we did come to an understanding. War isn’t about friendship. It’s not even about survival. It’s about believing in something bigger and more important than yourself. We may have lived very different lives, but we are all heading into the same battle and our survival will rely on learning to trust each other.

“Want a piece of cake?” Ray asks.

“Yeah,” I answer. “Thanks.”

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Chapter Four

Lauren

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

I CLOSE THE door to my son's old bedroom, leaving the robots with books and a television on to occupy them. We're test driving the honor system.

George and John are easy to deal with, the other two are more of a challenge. Ashley was the only reason the little ones came out from beneath her old bed and allowed themselves to be relocated. It took mere seconds for them to find fresh hiding spaces in Ryan's room. Ashley believes I can do what she has so far failed at—convince them that feeling nothing is not better than being alive and afraid. Her faith in me weighs heavily on my heart.

I return to Ashley's room, stopping at the door. Three utensils, each laid out on its own sleeping bag. They look a bit ridiculous there, but if they come back, I want to soften the blow of their return any way I can.

I've had time to plan and prepare. If they wake while I'm not there, I've placed a letter beside each of them, with directions on how to turn on the tablet I've placed on the desk. One tap turns it on. One tap on the triangle that appears will play a video. I put together a presentation explaining everything from what happened to them, how much time has passed, who has already come back to who I am, and what my goal is for them. For purposes of clarity, I also explained that any physical attraction they may feel toward me is due to the chemical bond that was formed when I woke them. I carefully outline how I intend to compare their blood samples to that of the others and hopefully isolate the cause of the bond.

I step inside the room because remaining so far away from them is unbearable. The intensity of our connection is relentless, stirring cravings

I've buried beneath years of logic, practicality, and cold, hard medical training. I need to be here with them.

I lower myself to the floor closest to the spoon. My knees press into the carpet that still has nail polish stains from Ashley. She always loved bright colors on her toenails. There's an innocence about this room that reflects how I want to feel for these men, but my heart races as my breathing quickens.

The spoon has a few marks on it, but fewer than the other two utensils. There's no way to know who is inside each of them, but I'm certain they're not empty. Aloud, I say, "I wish you could hear me. I know you feel my presence, but I also know that might not be enough to reassure you. I can't do this the fast way or the way the others did. I'm sorry. But I will bring you back and free you. I promise you that." I lean closer. "You're going to be okay. I've saved people in much worse situations."

None of the utensils respond but I didn't expect them to. I let out a shaky breath as I imagine how it must feel to be trapped in limbo. When they do come back, they may not handle it well. Jack kept returning to utensil form because he couldn't handle the realization that everyone he loved was dead. Ray came out fighting.

I promised Hugh I'd call at the first sign of one of them reverting. I assured him there would be plenty of notice because I wouldn't bring anyone back without the others there for support.

I shouldn't be this close to the spoon. Yet here I am, every inch of me alive and humming like a young woman preparing for her first date. It doesn't make sense, and I tell myself to get up and walk out of the room, but I don't.

I reach out, hand hovering over the gleam of polished silver.

Don't, a voice in me warns.

I close my eyes and let my hand wander over the cool handle of the spoon. It warms instantly and I can barely breathe.

I feel him. He's confused, but not scared. He knows I'm here.

And he yearns for me.

He doesn't understand how or why.

He doesn't know if he's dead or alive.

I'm what he wants and where he craves to be.

I pull my hand away and gulp in air. I don't want to feel this way. Giving in would lead nowhere good. I have to be strong, for the good of all

of us.

I am content with my life the way it is. I don't need a partner to complete me. I not only survived being left to raise twin babies on my own—I thrived and made a beautiful life for all three of us. So, whatever this chemical reaction is . . . it's wasted on me. I'm happy for my daughter, but I'm not following in her footsteps.

A sharp sting of longing wells in my chest, unexpected and raw. I tell myself it's empathy for the soldiers and their situation. I don't believe it though.

These men shouldn't suffer because I'm . . . I'm . . .

Afraid?

I scramble to my feet. "I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice cracking with regret. "I shouldn't have touched any of you. I should have told Mercedes she needed to find someone younger . . . braver."

That admission guts me. In the ER I'm considered fearless. I've half-convinced myself that I am. But this? This brings back too many memories I swore would never again have the power to upset me. I remember what it was like to love someone and believe he loved me back. I remember believing we would be together forever and nothing could change that because we were meant to be.

Nothing is meant to be.

Forever is a lie sold to women by the media. In reality, men only stay with a woman who makes life easier and more convenient. That's what they consider love.

I make it all the way to the door again before I pause. All I want to do is run and hide. It's unsettling to realize I am not so different from the spider robots. Glancing back over my shoulder, I promise to sort myself out before I enter the room again. I close the door behind me.

A few minutes later, I'm making myself a cup of tea and reach for a spoon to stir it, then pull back. No spoon. I dig through the utensil drawer for wooden chopsticks and use one of them instead.

I'm a mess.

My phone bings with a message. Braxton.

I made it safely to Ireland.

I half laugh at that. **I'm glad.**

How are you feeling?

I'm not ill.

What are your plans for this week?

Would you be offended if I told you they're none of your business?

I'm not easy to offend.

I've noticed.

Let's start this conversation over. But this time I'll be you.

I shake my head even though he can't see me. **I'm too tired for games, Braxton.**

Say it. Tell me you made it to Ireland.

I sigh. **I made it to Ireland.**

Braxton! I'm so glad! I was worried.

If we're doing this, I might as well have a little fun with it. **Sorry to interrupt your vacation. I know you asked me not to, but I do what I want.**

I find that attractive.

That had me blinking a few times. Was he answering as me or as himself? **I don't know how you can. Is it because I'm rich? I am, you know. So rich I have my own jet. Have I told you about the jet yet? It's a private one.**

No, money doesn't matter to me. What I care about is a person's character. I also have a feeling that you're well-endowed.

I snort out a laugh. **I agree about character mattering, but sadly the jet is how I compensate for a physical area where I'm lacking.**

Ouch. I mean, that's a shame. Luckily, it's your eyes I find irresistible.

He does have nice eyes. Dark brown, almost black, and always lit up like he just received amazing news. I shake that thought off. My reaction to the silverware has me all kinds of confused. I type: **Braxton**

Yes.

What do you do when you find yourself wanting something you shouldn't?

He doesn't instantly respond. **It depends on if it's a something or someone.**

Someone.

Well, then I'd ask myself if being with that person would make their life better or worse.

And if you're not sure?

I wait until they give me a sign that they want me as well.

It was good advice even if it didn't necessarily help me. **Thank you.**

Is that the problem you're dealing with on vacation? A man?

I wish it were that simple.

Two men?

There is no way in hell I'm admitting anything. So I write: **Be serious.**

I am.

I'm glad you got to Ireland safely. Goodnight, Braxton.

Lauren, all joking aside, all that matters to me is that you're happy and that whoever you're with treats you well.

Thank you. I pause then type: **And thank you for checking in on me. Always. Goodnight, Lauren.**

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Chapter Five

Pete

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

SHE WAS HERE, but she's gone again.

Was I supposed to go with her?

If so, how?

The last thing I remember is being at an Inkwell award dinner. They were giving us medals and telling us how grateful they were for all we'd done. Then nothing—until her.

Where am I?

And why is she so sad? I feel the weight of her loneliness as if it's my own. Someone hurt her deeply and she closed herself off. Like a princess in a tower. Trapped like I am, waiting for someone to save her but not believing anyone can.

I want to hold her, comfort her, tell her that love isn't a lie. My parents are two of the happiest people I've ever met, and their love for each other is what made my childhood as wonderful as it was. My brothers would all say the same.

My brothers.

Will I ever see them again?

I don't feel dead.

Am I critically injured? I didn't think that was possible anymore. Healing happens in moments as long as we're alive. So, what is this place?

Where has she gone? I ache for her to return.

How is that possible? I don't know her, but I crave her.

Come back to me.

I'm here. Waiting for you.

Come back.

Nothing.

It's disheartening, but I'm not the type to give up. She needs me. I'm meant to help her. I can't stay here. I have to be with her—wherever she is.

She needs to know that love is real.

I need to show her.

Now.

Something changes. The nothingness is gone and I'm lying on a soft material. I sit up and look down. I'm still in the uniform I wore at the award dinner. The medals I received shine in the light of a lamp. I look around. I appear to be in a bedroom. Beside me there are two sleeping bags, each with a utensil and an envelope next to them.

Odd.

I look beside me and discover that I also have an envelope. I know it's from her. Her essence lingers on it. I open it carefully and begin to read.

Her name is Lauren.

She's a doctor.

I'm safe and she's here to not only help me but also answer all the questions she's certain I'll have. I have more than a few.

She wrote directions for what to do with an item she left on the desk if I wake and she's not here. I close my eyes briefly then rise to my feet. She *is* here.

I open the door and let the pull of her lead me. I don't know where I am but everything here is a little different. I don't spend too much time on that. All I care about is her.

I make my way down a hallway and pause at a closed door. I don't know how I know, but she's not in there so I continue down the hall and through a dimly lit living room. I'm closer to her now than I was before. I can feel her.

I come to another closed door and open it before asking myself if I should. She's lying against a pile of pillows, half beneath a blanket, reading a book. It falls to her lap when she realizes I'm there.

"Oh. Oh." She shakes her head wildly enough that her glasses slide down her nose. She removes them, tossing them onto the bed beside her. "I wasn't expecting you yet."

I step farther into the room. She's gorgeous just as I knew she would be. Her hair is piled into a wild bun on the top of her head. Her nightgown is

somewhere between modest and sinfully thin, failing to conceal how her body is responding to my appearance. I tear my gaze from her chest and lose myself in the beauty of her eyes. Wide. Intelligent. Stunning. “I can go out and come back in if you need to put some clothes on.”

She glances down, brings a hand up to cover her face for a moment, then squares her shoulders and says, “No. No, I’m fine. Did you watch the video?”

“The video?”

“The one on the tablet. I left directions for how to use it in the letter.”

I step closer because being far away from her seems wrong. “I read the letter, but I came to find you instead.” I look her up and down, enjoying the way her cheeks flush beneath my attention. “You’re beautiful.”

She raises a hand. “Thank you, but everything you’re feeling right now isn’t real. It’s a condition brought on by what happened to you at the award dinner.” She swings her legs out from beneath the blankets and stands. “You need to watch the video. It’ll answer all of your questions.”

I close the distance between us. “I doubt it will answer this one.” I cup the back of her head and haul her to me for a kiss, careful to be gentle. I need to know how she tastes. Her lips remain immobile beneath mine at first, but then she sighs and kisses me back, her hands going to my shoulders.

If this is heaven, I’m willing to spend eternity here.

She softens and molds against me, then stiffens and pushes against my chest with both hands. I release her.

We stand there, breathing raggedly.

She backs away and raises a hand again, one finger in the air, like a teacher about to make a point her students should attend to. “Okay. No more of that.” She clears her throat. “I’m nearly twice your age. I understand that you’re feeling an attraction for me. And I can’t deny that I feel something as well. But, and this is the important part, it’s not real. We’re both suffering from a condition I caused by touching you while you were dormant.”

“I don’t understand.”

She walks over to a closet and pulls a large shirt over her head then steps into a thick, baggy pair of pants. It’s adorable that she thinks covering herself up will lessen how much I want her. I don’t understand what’s going on or why I’m already attached to her, but I do want her to feel comfortable.

I probably shouldn't have given in to the impulse to kiss her. Hoping to ease the tension between us, I say, "You forgot your feet."

She looks down then back at me. It takes her a moment to realize it's a joke. Her lips twist in an embarrassed smile. "I'm normally much better at handling the unexpected."

"I'm sure the unexpected doesn't often show up in your bedroom."

"That is certainly true." She takes a deep breath. "Hi. I'm Lauren."

"Hi, Lauren. I'm Pete."

Her expression turns sympathetic. "A lot has happened since the award dinner. Too much for me to easily explain, which is why I prepared a presentation for you."

"The video."

"Yes. It's like a movie, but on a small screen."

"Will you watch it with me?"

"Of course." She walks to the door, taking a path that leaves a good distance between us.

Okay, she's nervous. I probably should be. Nearly dying so many times over the last few years has made it difficult for me to fear much.

I follow her back to the room I woke in. She retrieves the thing she calls a tablet and looks around the room. There's a desk and a bed. She considers choosing the bed as a place to sit then changes her mind and waves for me to follow her back out of the room.

She plants herself on one end of a couch and motions for me to sit in the chair next to it. I give her a look and choose a place on the couch a good two feet from her.

There's an expression in her eyes that's difficult to discern as she holds the tablet to her chest. "I wish there was a better way to tell you all of this."

I nod because I feel her sincerity. Whatever she is about to show me, it can't be worse than realizing I can never go home. Somehow, despite how Inkwell had faked our deaths and made us into something that normal society could never accept—somehow, I'd held onto the dream of going home after the war ended. I said something like that to Ray the night of dinner and he told me Director Falcon would never let that happen. He told me if we lived everyone we loved would die at the hands of Inkwell. There was no going home for any of us. Sometimes Ray says things out of rage, but I saw the truth in his eyes. Somehow, he knew our fate and it was an ugly one.

I give Lauren a reassuring smile. “Whatever it is, I can handle it.” Cause I’m still here.

She presses something on the tablet then turns it so I can see it. As the presentation plays, a myriad of emotions come and go only to come and go again, like waves on a beach. Disbelief. Confusion. Anger. Disbelief. More anger. More confusion.

Scenes from 1945 flash across the screen. How the United States ended the war stuns me. Angers me. Makes me question everything I thought I knew about Inkwell. A familiar face appears on the screen. Hugh. He explains that we’ve been gone for eighty years. He tells me to remain calm and to trust no one beyond Lauren and the people he’ll introduce in this video.

When he says that our unit was somehow trapped in silverware all this time and how he, Jack, and Ray were brought back. I look at Lauren. She responds with an awkward smile and says, “That was necessary before we fully understood the process.”

“Hard luck.”

My intention was to make her smile and it works. “Keep listening. There’s a lot you need to know.”

By the end of Hugh’s portion of the video, my head is spinning. Was this what Ray meant when he said there was no going home for us? Did he know? My head starts pounding as I try to take in that I may actually be in the future and sometimes a utensil. How the fuck does anyone come to terms with that?

Hugh promises to guide me through adjusting to this place and time. He tells me I’m not alone and in time I’ll discover that life in the future has benefits.

I’m more concerned with the past. “Did Inkwell kill my family?”

“No. Your brothers went on to marry and have children. Your parents were grandparents and then great-grandparents before they passed of natural causes. We couldn’t find any living siblings, but you have family from the following generations.”

I cover my face and let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good.” When I meet her gaze again, concern is darkening those beautiful eyes of hers. “It’s a lot to take in, but I’ve survived some heinous things. I’ll survive this.”

“Yes, you will.” She places her hand over mine and we both freeze. My experience with women is limited due to my prior condition, but I’ve pined

for one or two over the years. Nothing I felt for them compared to this. Her eyes widen and she whips her hand away.

I understand. This is intense.

Lauren's image comes on the screen. So serious. Her tone is professional and she's in a lab coat. I'm impressed not only by her obvious intelligence, but also by her determination to help all of us. She explains that a bond is formed between the soldiers trapped in the silverware and the woman who wakes them—a bond that could easily be confused with sexual or emotional attachment. She follows that with a plan for how she intends to break that bond and free us from her.

When the video ends, neither of us speak for several minutes. I must be in shock because I'm temporarily numb. It's too much to take in all at once.

Eventually, she says, "If you have any questions, I'll do my best to answer them."

Do I? "I don't know what I'd even ask."

She nods sympathetically. "That's normal. It'll take time to sort through everything you just learned."

"Yeah." I run my hands through my hair and note how her eyes widen at the move. In the video, she explained that a woman named Mercedes had handed her a set of silverware. "I do have one question."

She swallows visibly. "Go ahead."

"If you knew that touching the silverware would bond us to you, why did you do it?"

She looks away for a moment, her voice raw. "I don't know."

Yes, she's older than I am, but all I see is a proud, brilliant woman, unwilling to admit to herself that she might also be lonely.

How I feel for her and what I want isn't as important as what I am beginning to understand she needs. "Should I apologize for kissing you?"

"Not necessary. You're technically under the influence of the transition."

"I don't regret it. It was a nice way to be welcomed back."

She smiles. "Thanks."

I remember the silverware in the bedroom I woke in. "Do you know who they are? The fork and the knife?"

"No."

"Do you feel as connected to them as you feel to me?"

“Yes.” Although I don’t like the idea of her wanting another man, I find myself respecting her more each time she chooses honesty when many people might have lied.

“Are you able to sense anything about them?”

Her teeth close on her bottom lip before she says. “The fork is smooth. Does that make sense? He feels like a charmer who puts up an act instead of letting someone in. Maybe I’m imagining that, but that’s what I felt the first time I touched him.”

“Franklin. That must be Franklin. What about the knife?”

“He’s angry. Very angry. And hurt. Disappointed in both Inkwell and himself. But not dangerous the way I believe Ray can be.”

“Elliot. That sums him up well.”

Lauren picks up a smaller version of the tablet and says, “This is a phone. I promised I’d call Hugh as soon as one of you returned.”

With the speed Inkwell gave me, I remove the phone from her hand and place it on the other side of me. “Before you do that, I have a request.”

She looks unnerved by my move, but she nods. “What is it?”

“I just found out everything and everyone I know outside of my unit is gone. I need a hug.”

She doesn’t budge. “That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Is it me you don’t trust or yourself?”

Her lips press together. “Despite how we feel, there will be no sexual relations between us.”

“Okay. I can agree to that as long as you agree that hugging doesn’t have to be sexual.”

Her face tenses with confusion. “How you feel must be confusing, but __”

I lift her up and sit her across my lap sideways, wrapping my arms around her. “You need this as much as I do.”

She sits there, stiff as a board, but I don’t release her.

Against her hair, I murmur. “Just a hug. We haven’t known each other long enough for you to trust me, but I have to believe you can sense that you’re safe with me. I’d never hurt you. You’re a part of me.”

Her body shudders against mine, but she doesn’t demand to be released.

And for now, that’s enough.

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Chapter Six

Lauren

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

"This is a bad idea," I say weakly as a tsunami of emotions rises within me. I wish I could say I don't remember the last time a man held me like this, but I do. I was twenty years old and so damn in love I couldn't see the man I'd chosen wanted to change everything about me.

I've had sex a few times over the years, but always at hotels and I never stayed the night. I'm human and wanting sex isn't something I consider shameful. But being held on the lap of a man? It's a different layer of intimacy and something I wouldn't have tolerated from any of the men I've been with over the years.

I struggle to remain detached even as my insides begin to cascade. This is wrong for so many reasons. Pete is in a vulnerable position and under the influence of some chemical bond to me. We just met. Whatever closeness we feel is a fabrication. I should be calling Hugh instead of allowing him to become more attached to me.

So, why am I not ordering him to let me up?

Why am I shaking like a puppy left outside in the rain?

I could claim I have a thing for men in uniform, but like Pete said, this isn't a sexual hug—despite his erection. His muscular arms are wrapped around me and the only reason I'm not tucked against the medals on his jacket is because of my rigid, upright position. What is it about being cocooned in the protective strength of this man that has me crumbling on the inside?

His voice is gentle when he says, "If I said I can feel your emotions, would you believe that's possible?"

I let out a shaky breath. “It’s a side effect of the bond. All the men who’ve returned are capable of connecting on some mental level with the woman who brought them back and in some cases others.”

“So, what I’m feeling is real?”

“Since I don’t know what you’re feeling I can’t say for sure, but potentially, yes.”

He dips his head closer to mine and my breath catches. There’s so much kindness and patience in his eyes. “It doesn’t go both ways? You can’t feel what I am feeling?”

When I don’t immediately answer, he continues, “You can, but you’re not allowing yourself to. You’re afraid you might start to care for me and I’ll hurt you when I leave just like the father of your children did.”

My hands fist at my sides. “I have a wonderful life. I prefer to be alone.”

“You’ve told yourself that so many times you almost believe it.”

I glare at him. *Get out of my head.*

His eyes round. “You just spoke in my thoughts. We can do that?”

I’m so out of my depth. Why did I think I could do this? I thought I could help these men, but all I’m doing is making things worse for them. I need to call Hugh before . . .

Stop beating yourself up, Lauren. I’m a grown man. I’ll admit I don’t fully understand what’s going on yet, but I know how lucky I am that you’re the one who woke me. You want nothing from me. Do you know how refreshing that is?

I shake my head. *I’m older. I should be wiser than this.*

Without speaking he whispers in my mind, *If it helps, technically, I’m twice your age.*

A smile curls one side of my mouth, but I don’t give in to it. *It doesn’t, but thank you.*

“Lauren,” he says aloud. “I won’t leave you.”

I clear my throat. “You will because my goal is to free you from being bonded to me. It may take some time, but this was engineered by someone, which means it can be reversed.”

“Is that what you want?”

I look down. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“For you or for me?”

It’s not only an uncomfortable question because I don’t have a quick answer to it, but also because I know he knows I don’t. “You deserve to be free to fall in love with someone your age or to stay single if that’s your choice. I’m too old, too jaded . . .”

“So, your goal is that I stop thinking you’re the most beautiful woman, inside and out, that I’ve ever met?”

“Yes,” I whisper even as I flush with pleasure because I can feel how attracted he is to me. And me? I want to say I can’t be attracted to a younger man, but he has a strong jaw, stunning eyes, and the toned body of a soldier at his peak fitness level. There’s nothing not to like and it’s way too easy to imagine ripping off his uniform and kissing my way down his wide chest, over his hard, flat stomach and lower . . .

Easy there. He chuckles. *It’s been a long time for me and I’m trying to be a gentleman.*

I blush like I haven’t in years. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m fighting similar thoughts.” He shares one with me. We’re naked. My legs are wrapped around his waist and he’s lowering me onto his cock. My sex throbs in response. “But we don’t want that, right?”

Mouth dry, I swallow before nodding. “Right. That’s what we’re not going to do.”

“Lauren?”

“Yes.”

“What if there is a possible outcome for us that you haven’t considered?”

“Such as?”

“What if we were meant to help each other? What if we could spend time together, get to know each other, and even if things don’t work out, be better off because we did?”

I don’t have words to express how intimately I feel connected to him in that moment. “I’m not totally opposed to the idea of us having sex.”

He laughs and it’s so damn hot I bite my bottom lip. “How about, we start with a real hug? One where you look less like someone who was just kidnapped off the street and forced to sit on me?”

Sex would be easier for me.

I know. And that’s why it would mean less. Trust me, Lauren. Let me hold you.

I hate how much I want him to.

He kisses the side of my forehead and speaks in my head. *You didn't let yourself cry when he left you because you thought you needed to be strong for your babies. You didn't let yourself cry later, because you were giving everything in you to them and to your job. What would happen if you finally let yourself cry now? What are you afraid of?*

I cover my face with my hands. He sees too much. I've never felt so vulnerable and exposed. In a low voice, I say, "I survived by continuing on. I put one foot in front of the other and forced myself to keep going. People think I'm strong, but I'm not. If I let myself start to fall apart . . ."

He hauls me against his chest and tucks me beneath his chin. "You can be afraid and be strong. Sometimes letting yourself break a little is the only way to heal."

Those weren't just words he was saying to make me feel better. He let me in and walked me through how joining Inkwell had changed him. And he didn't hold back. He let me see his initial innocence and how fear was something he'd wrestled with while undergoing the injections. I felt the dread he had each time more men didn't survive and the guilt that filled him each time he did.

Within the safety of his embrace, he showed me times he was proud of a mission they'd completed and times when he was sickened by the role he'd played in some. He thought he was saving the world. He didn't know he was nothing more than a pawn.

And finally, he let me see how his bond to me is the only thing that makes sense to him right now. He's struggling with what he's done and all he's lost. He doesn't know if he's human anymore and isn't sure that the world wouldn't be better off if none of them were brought back.

I hug him tightly when he shares that last thought and think, *You wouldn't be here if you weren't meant to be.*

He kisses the top of my head. *You don't believe in fate.*

I don't know what I believe anymore.

I bet we could figure it out . . . if you let me in.

"I don't—"

"I just showed you me at my best and worst. Do you respect me less because of it?"

"No."

"Then show me."

It’s not easy to. To let him in, I have to reopen memories I sealed shut for decades. I find the day the twins were born. Kevin and I had talked about marrying when they arrived. It was supposed to be a beautiful day. I hadn’t expected an ultimatum. To be a family, I would have had to give up my dreams of being a doctor.

I told him I couldn’t do that.

Kevin said I made my choice when I got pregnant. Like it was my fault and not something he’d been involved in.

And what if I don’t leave school? What if I don’t want to stay home?

Then we’re done. I know what I want and if you’re selfish enough to put your needs above those of your children, then you’re not the woman I thought you were.

Just like that?

Just like that.

You said you loved me.

That was when I thought you were someone I could love . . .

Pete’s arms tighten around me. “He was wrong. There is nothing selfish about wanting to save lives.”

“I know.”

He tips my chin upward so I’m forced to meet his gaze. “You know you can’t lie to me. He did you a favor by leaving. You would have been miserable if you stayed and tried to make him happy.”

Tears silently begin to run down my cheeks. “He found another woman, married her, had children with her. We don’t exist to him. His wife doesn’t know he has children outside of their marriage.”

“You hurt not just for yourself, but for your babies.”

I nod and bury my face in his chest. I’m holding back a sob, but just barely.

He rocks me back and forth. “You’re not alone now, Lauren. I’m here and I care. That bastard has held you back for too long. Cry for what he did to you and your children. Let it out. And then let him go.”

I punch Pete in the arm right before I give myself over to a long, ugly cry. And, damn, it feels good. When I finally catch my breath, he offers me a handkerchief, and I blow my nose. I’m exhausted but also somehow lighter.

“I didn’t have crying on the lap of a super soldier on my bingo card for 2024 but thank you.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but you’re welcome.” He lifts me into his arms and carries me to my bedroom. I don’t even protest.

He lowers me to my feet, lifts the shirt I threw on over my nightgown, then removes my sweatpants. Without breaking eye contact, he steps out of his shoes and strips off his jacket and dress shirt. I hold my breath, unsure of how far this is going.

In a move that feels like it’s out of a movie, he sweeps me up like I weigh nothing, tucks me beneath the blankets, then joins me. He slides an arm beneath me, pulls me to his chest, and wraps himself around me from behind. “Relax, Lauren. All I want to do is hold you.”

This isn’t how I act. I’m not overly emotional; I’m the one who always claims the caretaker role. I melt against him, loving that his arm is under my head like a pillow and murmur, “Of course you want to spoon.”

“Why do you say that?” Then he laughs. “Oh, yes, because I’m a spoon. Cute.” He kisses the side of my neck.

I settle closer to him and allow myself to bask in the feeling of being with someone who cares about me. Okay, so maybe this isn’t real. Everything we feel for each other might fade away, but it’s here now, and it feels too good to deny.

Now that’s a thought I can endorse, he whispers in my thoughts.

I yawn. *Stop reading my mind.*

He chuckles. *Go to sleep, Lauren. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a big day. You have two more pieces of silverware to wake, and I have to figure out how to be okay with that.*

I lay there, suddenly wide awake, listening to his breathing deepen. Any control I imagined I had over this situation is gone. I never called Hugh and, even if it was just for a few minutes, I completely forgot about the other utensils.

What’s happening to me?

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Chapter Seven

Pete

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

It's DARK WHEN I wake, still wrapped around Lauren. I lie there for a long time going through everything I've learned about myself as well as about her. She says that what I feel for her can be cured. Do I want it to be?

She feels like she's already mine, but there are two men in the other room who may feel the same way about her. If my guesses were correct, and they're Franklin and Elliot, I'm the best match for her. Franklin is a playboy who changes women as often as people change their socks. He didn't stop hooking up with them when we thought it might be dangerous to. Hugh would be furious with him for that.

But that's Franklin. He doesn't care about anyone but himself. He swore loyalty to the unit, but he left his station more than once for a quick meetup. He's too smart to brag about that to many people, but he'd tell me. I didn't rat him out, but that doesn't mean I'll be okay with him anywhere near Lauren. She's been hurt enough.

And Elliot? He's still working too much of his own shit out. I'd lay down my life for either of them, but neither are good enough for Lauren. She needs an emotionally mature man who can fill her life with love and laughter.

Me.

Mind racing, I slide my arm out from under Lauren and make my way out of the room as quietly as possible. The hallway is dark, as is the living room. I don't know where any of the switches are, but I see well in the dark.

Only the sound of the floorboards creaking beneath my bare feet breaks the silence of the night. I consider revisiting the room with the silverware

and sleeping bags, but my stomach is rumbling for food. Kitchen first. I think it's on the other side of the living room.

Something scurries across my toes and I jump so high I hit my head on the ceiling then land in a crouch, with one hand flat on the floor.

That's when I see it, a set of glowing eyes on a table the height of my head. What the fuck is it? It darts one way, then the other. I straighten to full height. A second one appears and I take a step back. Four eyes glowing in the dark, watching me.

Is this what lurks in the night in the future? Are they dangerous?

Something buzzes by my head. The square body of it is ghostly transparent, full of blinking lights. I raise my hand to take a swing at it.

"Don't touch him," a voice calls out. "Freeze where you are."

"Who's there?" I demand. I'm surrounded, but what are they? Does Inkwell know I've returned, and this is how they intend to take me out a second time?

"For a super soldier, you sure are easy to scare," the voice answers.

"It's been a long day," I answer defensively, feeling ridiculous. "Sorry if it's taking me a minute to get used to being in the future."

"I understand," a flying object says. "I have anxiety too."

"That you gave to yourself," the other voice adds with some snark.

I relax a little. I don't know what these things are, but unless they're armed with an explosive, I'm confident I could tear them to shreds with my bare hands before they're able to do much damage to me.

An overhead light is flipped on and I look down to see a knee-high mechanical device with wheels, and a few arms, wearing a purple cowboy hat. "What the hell are you?"

"Howdy, partner! Name's George, and yeah, I know what you're thinkin'—what's a flashy fella like me doin' zoomin' around here? Well, let's just say I'm a robot with a flair for fun and a knack for causin' a ruckus. What's your name, soldier?"

"A robot? Those are a thing now?" I'd heard the future might have something like that.

The flying machine returns. "Do you feel calmer? We know humans don't like the dark."

"You can speak. Got it." They didn't appear dangerous.

"I'm John," the flying one announces. "And don't mind George. He doesn't normally talk like that. He's been watching old westerns instead of

porn and now he thinks he's a cowboy."

"Careful, partner, no one likes a rat," the one on the ground responds.

"And we're having a conversation now. O-Kay."

Cowboy robot rolls closer. "It's only a conversation if you answer us. What's your name?"

I glance around but whatever the glowing eyes belonged to is gone. "Where did the rest of you go?"

"The little ones are shy," George says. "Did you come from Lauren's bedroom?"

I'm not telling these things anything, not until I know if they're Lauren's or if Inkwell sent them. "What are you doing here?" I demand.

George twirls and beeps. "I won't answer your questions if you won't answer ours."

The flying machine circles me then hovers near the one in a hat. "We're visiting Lauren for a few weeks."

George tips his hat back. "I'm here because Ashley believes her mother won't have sex with any of you. Did she? Did I miss it?"

I turn my attention to the machine called John. "Is there a way to turn him off?"

"Sadly, no," John answers without missing a beat.

"Turn me off? Me? I'll turn you off." George leaps into the air and makes a screeching sound in my face. I bat him away. He flies across the room, landing on his side with his wheels still turning.

"What the hell was that?" I growl.

George uses one of his mechanical arms to right himself. "Why didn't you turn back into silverware?"

"Were you trying to scare me?" I mock, my eyes dart around the room, scanning for more of these machines. When George begins to move toward me, I command, "Stop where you are."

George rolls closer with more boldness than his size should allow for. "Don't tell me what to do." He rises up on his wheels, which only adds an inch or two to his height. "Or I'll—"

"What's going on in here?" Lauren asks from a few feet away. Her hair is delightfully mussed, and that nightgown of hers sends my blood rushing downward.

George and I point at each other and, in unison, claim, "He started it."

Lauren looks from me to George and back, then, quite to my surprise, bursts out laughing. “This is my life now. I have a spoon and a horny robot fighting in my living room.” She bends, still laughing, gasping for air. “How is this my life?”

John flies around her once, then hovers near me. “We may have broken her.”

Two little spider-like creatures come out from under the couch and approach her, looking . . . concerned? Their little feet make clickity-clack sounds on the floor. One turns to face me, its eyes round and glowing, while the other inspects Lauren. “So that’s what I saw in the dark.”

The one facing me huddles closer to the other one. I want to assure it I have no intention of hurting it, but since I just batted George across the room, I doubt it would believe me.

When I approach Lauren, the spider thingies scurry back under the couch. “Are you okay?” I ask.

As she straightens, her hair flips back, and her breasts dance freely and all coherent thought leaves me. The smile she flashes me is mesmerizing. “Sorry,” she says breathlessly. “I’ve just reached my quota for what I can take seriously. What happened out here?”

I feel a little foolish for battling something that looks like a child’s toy. “I wasn’t expecting to encounter anything on my way to the kitchen.”

George waves his arms around. “I thought intense emotion changed them back into utensils, so I tried to scare him, and he slugged me.”

I frown down at him. “If you want to scare someone, you might want to lose the silly hat.”

George retracts both in height and width and rolls away.

John follows him for a few feet, then flies back to us. “He loves that hat. It was the first thing Ashley gave him after she updated our code. She told him it made him look handsome.”

“He’s a machine,” I say incredulously.

Lauren purses her lips. “He’s sentient, and I owe my daughter an apology for doubting her.”

Sentient? Machines? It sounds impossible, but I went to an award dinner as a super soldier and woke up eighty years later after being imprisoned in a spoon—so maybe nothing is impossible.

A moment later, Lauren meets my gaze and I know what she’s thinking even though I can’t hear her thoughts. “I’m not apologizing to a machine.”

“He needs to learn impulse control, but he didn’t hurt you, so there was no real harm done. Can you say the same?”

I glance over to where George is sulking. Do robots sulk? I guess if they’ve achieved a level of thinking and feeling, they might. He does look hurt by what I said. I know what it’s like to be ridiculed, to be told to ignore the cruel comments, when there is really no way to. Before Inkwell, I couldn’t control my flatulence, and many people—people I knew, as well as strangers—mocked me.

“George,” I call out, but he doesn’t respond. I clear my throat and raise my voice. “I’m sorry I made fun of your hat.”

He turns slowly. “It’s not silly. Ashley thinks it looks good on me.”

I exchange another look with Lauren, sigh, head over to where George is, and sit on the floor beside him. “I was angry. You startled me, and I did something I wasn’t proud of. I shouldn’t have taken that out on you.”

His little shoulders slump. “No matter how hard I try, I’ll never be human.”

I shift closer. “Me neither.”

His head spins toward me. “You *are* human.”

“I was. I don’t know what the hell I am anymore.” I run a hand through my hair. “So, in a way, you’re better off than I am. At least you know what you are.”

“John doesn’t think people will ever accept us. I don’t understand why. They made us. Why would we scare them?”

“I’ve been asking myself all the same questions. One minute Inkwell is pinning medals to my chest and calling me a hero . . . the next minute they’re trying to eradicate me.”

John hovers above George. “We do have much in common with you.”

Lauren joins us. She looks over at the couch the spiders disappeared beneath, then lays a hand on my thigh. *I know this may seem like a crazy thing to ask for . . .*

Crazy seems to be the norm now.

She smiles. *Ashley asked me to try to help the two little robots. They regret becoming sentient. They want to go back to when they couldn’t feel anything because they’d rather feel nothing than be afraid. I want to help them.*

I lay a hand over hers. *What do you want me to say?*

Aloud, I ask, “Pete, have you ever been afraid?”

Oh, I see what you're doing. "Absolutely. When I first joined Inkwell and realized my only way out was death . . . I was terrified. Each injection thinned our unit. No one knew if they'd survive the next round."

"But you did."

"Yes, only to be sent on missions where more of us died. I was less afraid then, though . . ."

"Why?" John asks.

The two little spider robots poke their heads out from under the couch.

"I had a purpose and had become close to several men in my unit. Those two things put fear in the backseat."

George tilts his square head to one side. "I don't have a purpose."

"I don't either," says John.

The spider robots skitter closer until they're beside Lauren's leg. She looks down at them. "When I was a child, I knew I wanted to go into medicine. I was born with a purpose; at least, I've always felt so. When everything else fell apart, that's what gave me strength."

"How does one find their purpose?" George asks.

It's an unsettlingly deep question. I clear my throat. "I think it finds you."

Lauren's smile is gentle. "Sometimes they get dropped off at your apartment." She meets my gaze. "Or get handed to you by your daughter's friend."

Careful, I warn. *Keep talking like that, and I might fall for you even if you can break our bond.*

Whatever she's about to respond with is interrupted by the spiders jumping on her leg. She gasps in surprise and grips my thigh hard. *I think we won them over*, she says without speaking. With a tentative laugh, she touches one gently as if it were a small kitten. It stills beneath her touch but stays.

I understand. The way I feel about Lauren, myself, suddenly being dumped into the future—it's all too much to wrap my head around.

But I don't want to leave either.

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Chapter Eight

Lauren

I'M SMILING DOWN at the spider robot on my lap when my phone rings and I answer it, thinking it's likely Ashley. "Hello."

"You sound happy," Braxton says with a smile in his voice. "I like it."

My face warms. "Everyone needs a vacation now and then."

"I hope I'm not interrupting time with your—"

"Braxton, is there a reason for this call?"

He laughs. "Ireland is beautiful but surprisingly lonely."

For just a moment I imagine how this conversation would make me feel if I believed him, and it leaves me uneasy. Wealthy, handsome, and respected by both his peers and those he greets for the first time with a handshake and a smile. I doubt he's been lonely once in his life.

Who is this man?

My gaze flies to meet Pete's, and I realize my hand is still on his thigh. His response to Braxton is a mixture of curiosity and territorial mental posturing. *He's someone I work with through the hospital. No one important.*

Show me.

There's nothing to show.

Then don't close me out.

Realizing how instinctively I'd instantly done that, I let Pete in. I show him the day Braxton came to the hospital for the first time and asked me to join a meeting he was having with the administration. I let him see how our entire relationship is nothing more than a casual extension of my role as a hospital liaison.

Pete pushes for more and I almost shut him out, but I can feel how much my happiness matters to him. So I let him deeper. He wanders around

memories I have of Braxton cheering me on through every major life event. Ashley and Ryan graduating from high school and then college. My promotions. Birthdays. Holidays. He's never forgotten to reach out with a call, a card, or a small gift.

He's in love with you.

I tense and whip my hand off Pete's leg. The spider robots jump away from me, scurrying to the safety of their hiding places. "You're wrong," I say firmly as I rise to my feet.

Pete stands as well. "I wish I were."

"Is someone there with you?" Braxton asks.

My emotions are in a jumble. If I had to choose one word to describe how I feel, it would be—cornered. Pete is towering over me, holding my gaze. "Yes. Friends of Ashley's are staying with me while I help them sort a few things out."

Pete's eyebrows rise. *Is that all I am to you?*

Get out of my head! I don't like that I can hear him without physically touching him. *It's all we can be to each other.*

Instant concern fills Braxton's voice. "How can I help?"

I let out a slightly hysterical laugh. *With which part? The robots and how I'm beginning to think my daughter is right and that they're alive? Or that I am insanely attracted to a man half my age, or is twice my age . . . I don't know.* "No need. I have everything under control."

Pete frowns. *You're as bonded to me as I am to you?*

It's taking everything in me not to throw myself into Pete's arms and admit that I am. I fist my free hand at my side. *I shouldn't have slept in your arms last night. It confused both of us.*

His smile is sad. *I understand.*

You do?

You're scared.

I was. When I first saw the blood samples from the others and realized what had been done to you but now that I've had time to—

Talk to Braxton. If we do end up together I want it to be because you chose me and not because you never let yourself choose him.

I don't understand.

Yes, you do. Instead of hanging up on him this time, tell him what you're struggling with.

I shake my head. *That I'm fighting feelings for you?*

Maybe leave that part out. The corners of his eyes crinkle. Without another word, Pete leaves the living room and I'm left with a curious but quiet audience of robots. When I point and tip my head in the direction Pete took, they follow him—John in the lead, the little ones in a rush, and George reluctantly wheeling himself out backward.

I sit heavily on the edge of the couch. "Braxton?"

"Yes."

"I can't tell you the details, but I'm working on something that has me more confused than I thought it would."

"Helping Ashley's friends?"

"Yes."

"Are they in legal trouble?"

"No . . . they're coming out of a situation that wasn't healthy for them. I probably shouldn't have gotten involved, but now that I am, I want to solve every part of this for them."

"Financially?"

"It's more complicated than that."

"I can fly back and—"

"That would probably make things worse."

He coughs on a laugh. "You're a difficult person to help."

He's not wrong, so I don't deny it. I blurt, "I thought I understood not only myself but how the world works. I don't know what to think about anything anymore. Up is down. Wrong feels right. I make life and death decisions on a regular basis and I don't second guess myself—but this. I don't know what to do with this." My voice trails away.

He clears his throat. "Without details, it's difficult to suggest much, but I know you, and there is no one I would trust more to help me if I were in crisis."

"You mean that." It wasn't a question. I can feel the sincerity in his voice, feel it in a way I haven't been able to before. It's like when a phone signal is choppy from poor service, then suddenly becomes clear.

"I do. Whatever these friends of Ashley have been through, they're lucky to have you on their side."

"Thank you."

"And if there is anything I can do . . ."

He means that too. Those aren't just platitudes. Pete misread that as love, but he's young and he would. Braxton and I have known each other

for a long time. Maybe trusting him, even if it's only with a little of this, wouldn't be such a large risk.

I decide to move the conversation to somewhere more private and slip into Ryan's old bedroom. My apartment will soon be chaotic when the two other soldiers wake. Everyone will want to gather. We'll need significant time in a lab. I imagined using Cheryl's place, but that would mean leaving three confused men and four robots unsupervised. Or would I take them all with me? Neither seems like a good idea. "If I ask you for something, would you be okay with me not explaining why I need it?"

"Although that does sound like a lead-in to requesting I drive the getaway car, I'm in."

A confusing warmth spreads through me. "It's not quite as dramatic as that. I'd like to temporarily relocate to a larger place with a lab."

"What kind of equipment would you need?"

I list off a few things as a mental checklist for myself rather than for him. "I'd like to play geneticist for a few weeks."

"We all have hobbies, I suppose."

"Ideally, the place would be somewhere private and big enough so Ashley and her friends could stay with me. Just for a few weeks. Close, but outside the city. Could you help me find somewhere like that?" I know it's a long shot, but he has a lot of medical connections. He might know of a vacant facility.

"You're in luck. I own what you're looking for."

"You do?"

"Forty minutes west of Providence. It was a campground, but I built a large house on it. Thirty or so acres. Several outbuildings. One could easily be modified into a lab. Private beach access to Bowdish Lake."

"And it's empty?"

"Yes. My family uses it in the summer, but it sits empty from late fall to spring."

"Your family," I say the words slowly.

He laughs. "I do have one. Two brothers, both married with kids."

I realize in that moment that I've never asked him about his life. "You're an uncle."

"Five times over." The smile returns to his voice. "Also, shamelessly in competition for the title of coolest uncle. The campground should have

cemented that, but my brother Teddy restores sailboats, so he's taken them all snorkeling since they were old enough to swim."

"Damn him," I joke.

"Exactly. I taught them to canoe, fish, and build stick forts. Do you know how many s'mores I've burned my fingers making for them? But Teddy has the lure of the ocean, clambakes, and sandcastles."

"Sounds rough." I chuckle, then add, "Does everyone go to both?"

"Oh, yes. Even my parents. They're getting older now, but they're happiest when they're separating sibling squabbles . . . from the grandkids to their grown ones."

"That sounds really nice and not how I imagined your life."

"Disappointingly normal?"

"No, not at all. I love that you're close to your family."

"They're what matters most. We've faced some tough times and have come out on the other side together and stronger." He clears his throat. "I bet you don't remember it, but you've met Teddy."

My mouth rounds. "When?"

"A long time ago. You were an EMT called to a fire in Cranston. Teddy dislocated his shoulder and asked you to put it back in its socket without telling anyone. He'd just come back from being put on light duty after twisting his knee, showing off at a party by doing a flip. He was afraid it would make him look bad to the chief. You helped him out and never said a word. He was impressed and talked about you so much his girlfriend nearly broke up with him, which would have been a shame because they've made two of my favorite nephews."

"I remember him. He was convinced his life would be over if anyone found out, so I wasn't about to say a word."

"Trust me, he appreciated that. So much so that he talked me into seeking you out. Apparently, he didn't approve of my prior taste in women and thought you would make a great addition to our clan."

"That's crazy."

"I thought so until I saw you in person. You were working the Pumpkin Festival for North Smithfield and teaching children to apply bandages to stuffed animals. The way you made the kids comfortable and spoke to them like they were little adults . . . I was impressed."

"Did you introduce yourself?"

“No. You were with a man that day, and, honestly, you looked happy together.”

“We were,” I whisper as my chest tightens. That’s probably one of the last good memories I have of Kevin before I found out I was pregnant.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up a bad memory.”

“Don’t be.” A flash of crying in Pete’s arms washes over me and oddly leaves me feeling better. “It was a different lifetime.”

“Is he Ashley and Ryan’s father?”

“Yes.”

“What happened? If you’re not okay with talking about it, don’t tell me.”

I inhale deeply and find the truth is no longer as painful. “He fell in love with who he thought I was. When the twins were born, he thought I should stay home and be content with that. I disagreed.”

“Do Ashley and Ryan have a relationship with him?”

“He’s never wanted one. He built a new life without us.”

“What a fool.”

“I use harsher words to describe him in my head, but yes.”

“I’m sorry you went through that, but I’m glad he didn’t stick around. You achieved your dreams without him.”

“Yes, I did.” I blink a few times quickly. “It took me a long time and a few detours, but I love what I do.” Neither of us speaks for a moment, then I spontaneously ask, “What do you do?”

“Philanthropy, mostly. I didn’t set out to become rich, but I invented something that happened to be what many people were looking for. It’s a case of being in the right place with the right product. I partnered with someone who was already wealthy and looking to become more so. He works the contracts side and I’m more or less the face of our company.”

“Is that a humble way of saying you’re a self-made millionaire?”

“Add a few zeros, and yeah, you could say that.”

He’s not joking. “That’s amazing.”

“Not really. It’s just a little sensor that I thought might save the life of fellow firefighters but ended up with a wider spectrum of usages. It picks up fluctuations in oxygen levels at a distance and through physical barriers. My goal was to predict flashovers but turns out it can be used in everything from aerospace engineering to waste management facilities.”

“*Fellow* firefighters? Were you a firefighter?”

His voice lowers. “In a different lifetime.” I have so many questions I don’t know where to start, but before I choose which one to lead with, he adds, “I’ll send you directions to the campground as well as the code to the house. Give me a few hours and I’ll have it freshened up and stocked with food for your stay.”

I open and close my mouth a few times before I finally say, “Thank you, Braxton.”

“You’re welcome. Text me tonight when you’ve settled in.”

“I will.” The memories Pete brought to the surface plague me as I prepare to end the call with Braxton. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I never asked you about your family. I don’t know when your birthday is and you always remember mine. You must think I’m a horrible person.”

“Quite the opposite. I don’t believe that caring for someone is transactional. You’re a good person, Lauren, and I selfishly like to see you smile.”

I almost ask why, then stop before I do.

“March sixteenth,” he says gently.

Emotions swirl up in me, too many to face at once. “I’ll remember. Thanks again.”

He chuckles and ends the call.

I drop the phone beside me and collapse backward onto the bed.

Could this get any more complicated?

There’s a knock on the bedroom door. I sit up quickly and my jaw drops open. There in the doorway is one of the most stunningly beautiful men I’ve ever seen. Tall. Mesmerizing dark eyes. Muscles for days. The smile he flashes me damn near robs me of my breath. The way he fills out his uniform, stretching in all the right places, is sinful.

“Hey, beautiful,” he says. “My name’s Franklin. Pete said you needed a moment alone, but I could feel you yearning for me.”

It wasn’t him I’d been yearning for.

And—*oh, shit.*

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Chapter Nine

Franklin

South Kingston, RI
1941

THE BUS STOP is near my family's store, so I go there first. My mother cries when she sees me and hugs me so hard I drop one of my crutches. She retrieves it quickly but slows to look at where my left leg used to be before handing the crutch back to me. I should have let the military hospital inform her I'd been injured, but I was angry—with myself for stupidly walking where I shouldn't have and with the doctors for not trying harder to save my leg. Angry at God for letting war happen. Just angry.

I needed time to heal both what was left of my leg as well my head before facing my family so I didn't allow them to be contacted. I'm by far not the only soldier who's been sent home broken, and I'm told that one day I'll feel lucky that all I lost was an appendage . . . but I feel like I failed my unit, myself, and the world.

I probably wouldn't have returned if it weren't for Susie and the promise I'd made her. Some men married their high school sweethearts before they left, but I wanted our wedding to be a celebration that war didn't overshadow. I wanted Susie to have the perfect day she'd always dreamed of.

My mother gives me a soda and the sandwich she brought for her own lunch. I haven't eaten since the day before so both are welcomed. It has been a long trip home, but I am back. "I should call your father. He might be able to leave the factory long enough to drive you home."

I give her cheek a kiss. "I'll see you at home later," I say, "but you know there's somewhere I need to go first."

She chews her lip with concern. “It’s been a while since any of us have heard from you, Franklin. Don’t you just go dropping in on Susie. She might be working in the yard and want to get all prettied up before she sees you.”

I make my way to the door. “She doesn’t have to try to be pretty, she’s perfect just the way she is.”

“Franklin—”

I turn, halfway out the door, because my mother’s tone is distressed. “Yes?”

She shakes her head. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Susie’s house is only a few blocks from my family’s store. I’ve broken a sweat by the time I reach her porch and my upper leg is throbbing, but I’m too excited to see her again to waste a second on physical discomfort.

I stop at the bottom step and take a deep breath, steadying myself. My chest is tight with nerves, but my heart’s pounding with anticipation and hope—also fear that nips at me that she might consider me less of a man now.

The sound of the crutches hitting the wood of the steps as I climb them echoes through me. I stop at the top. This is exactly where I stood the last time I saw Susie and we promised each other forever.

I knock, the sound louder than I’d meant, and hear footsteps inside. Her mother opens the door. Mrs. Taylor’s eyes flicker down to my crutches, my missing leg, then back up to my face. Her expression softens, but not in the way I’d hoped.

“Franklin,” she whispers, stepping onto the porch, wringing her hands as she closes the door behind her. “You came back.”

My smile falters. “Just like I promised, Mrs. Taylor. Is Susie home?” I shift my weight forward on my crutches.

Mrs. Taylor reaches out, her fingers wrapping around my arm. “Franklin, sweetheart, you should go.”

“Go? Is something wrong? Did something happen to Susie?”

My gaze whips past her, through the window beside the door, and that’s when I see Susie. She’s wearing one of her favorite bright dresses and flashing that smile of hers that I dreamed of so many times when I was away.

But she’s not alone.

There’s a thin, young man sitting beside her, his arm draped over the back of her chair, leaning in close.

And they kiss.

They fucking kiss.

I tear my arm away from her mother’s grasp and retreat in revulsion, tumbling backward down the porch steps. Mrs. Taylor cries out my name. Susie and the man she’d kissed appear at the top of the steps.

For a moment, I can’t move, caught in place, exposed, helpless, unable to run.

“Franklin,” Susie says, her voice is raw. “I thought you were dead. You stopped answering my letters and . . .”

I force a smile, tight and brittle, as I gather my crutches and struggle back to a standing position. “I promised I’d be back,” I say in a raspy voice.

The asshole at her side doesn’t have the decency to walk away. He puts his arm around her, asking if she’s okay.

Her wide eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry, Franklin.”

“Sorry?” I growl. “Sorry?”

Her mother places herself between us. “Like I said, Franklin, you should go.”

I look over her head to where Susie looks distressed, but is not pushing the man beside her away. “I love you, Susie.”

Tears begin to run down her face.

A car door slams behind me. “Franklin, get in the car,” my father says in a stern voice.

I can’t. I can’t leave her. This can’t be true. She and I have an entire life planned together. We’ve named our future children.

My father removes one of the crutches from beneath my arm, takes my weight onto himself and half drags me to his car. I don’t fight him when he opens the passenger door and practically shoves me inside.

I’m staring at Susie, waiting for her to step away from the man she found comfort in while I was gone. Waiting for her to run to me.

But she doesn’t.

Part of me dies that day as my father drives away.

I didn’t know coming home could be worse than going to war.

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Chapter Ten

Lauren

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

The energy in the room is supercharged. Pete's attractive, but Franklin has the kind of look that turns heads—of both sexes. If Hollywood spent years scouring the planet, I doubt they could produce a sexier soldier. The cocky tilt of his head as he looks me over is swoon worthy. So is the way his smile crooks to the side.

He's all male.

Confident.

Bold.

Full of swagger.

And even as I tell myself the bond I feel to him is no different from the false chemical reaction that bonded me to Pete, this hits differently. My hands flutter at my sides and my breathing shallows.

Give me strength.

Our eyes lock as he approaches. Running doesn't enter my mind.

"You're a doctor." His voice is low, smooth. "I like a smart woman." A playful expression flits across his face. "Truth be told, I like dumb ones as well."

He stops close enough to me that I could reach out and touch him if I let myself—I want to—really, really want to, but I keep my hands at my sides. "Did you watch the video?"

His nod is slow.

I swallow hard. "Do you have any questions?"

His gaze drops to my lips. "Only one—do we compete to win you or share?"

Desire shoots through me as I imagine both scenarios, and I gasp. My tongue darts over my bottom lip before I force out, “Neither. What you’re feeling right now is a chemical reaction brought on by what happened to you. If you watched the video, you know the goal is to free you from it.”

He reaches out, grabs me by the back of the head, and drags my face closer to his. “Isn’t sex always nothing more than a chemical reaction?” His lips hover above mine. “I’m going to fuck you in ways a normal man could never. You’ll beg me to stop and then beg me to do it all again. Once I’ve had you, you won’t want to cure either of us.”

I’d love to tell him he’s wrong, but I’m not so sure he is.

“Let her go,” Pete demands from the doorway.

Franklin’s hand tightens in my hair, arching my head back. His eyes remain glued to mine even as he answers Pete. “Why, so you can have her?”

“I won’t say it again,” Pete growls.

Franklin brushes his lips slowly, passionately over mine, and I’m so turned on I don’t protest. He raises his head and gently releases me. “Sorry, doll, looks like I have to handle an issue before we can continue.”

I’ve seen the carnage these men can cause when they fight. Ray, Hugh, and Jack tore up Ashley’s office and damn near killed each other. As Franklin begins to turn away, I grab his arm and silently implore: *Don’t.*

His face whips back toward mine. *Are you in my head?*

Yes.

He pulls away from my touch. “Get the fuck away from me.”

With lightning speed, Pete is at my side like a bodyguard. “Calm down, Franklin.”

I bring my hands up to my temples as the emotions of both of them are so intense they’re almost too much for me to take in. I’ve always considered myself a good reader of people, but this is different. We’re connected—all of us—on a level that I would have dismissed as impossible if I weren’t experiencing it.

Pete cares about Franklin, but he’s worried for me. He’s battling with his desire to claim me as his own, and he’s willing to kill Franklin to have me.

Franklin wants me and doesn’t care if I’m his or everyone’s, but when I spoke in his mind I shook him to the core. Why?

Our eyes meet again and what I sense then has me taking a step back. He is more afraid of me being in his head than he is of finding himself in

the future. That kind of fear makes a man dangerous.

In a tone I often use in the emergency room, I say, “Franklin, you were transformed into silverware and woke up in the future. Everything you’re feeling is natural. Anger. Fear. The desire to leave. This would be overwhelming for anyone. But you’re not the only one this happened to. Some of your unit are here and they’ll help you through this. You’re going to be okay.”

Pete shifts slightly in front of me. “She’s right, this is a lot for all of us, but we’re still here, and that has to be for a reason.”

Franklin is tense. The smooth, cocky man from a moment before is gone. He’s angry and confused. He doesn’t understand his intense feelings for me or how they are igniting rage within him.

Someone hurt this man. Deeply.

“I’m so sorry, Franklin,” I say softly.

He frowns at me. “What the fuck are you sorry for?”

“For entering your thoughts without asking.”

He rubs a hand over his forehead. “What have you done to me?”

“She didn’t do this,” Pete said forcefully. “Inkwell did. She’s trying to help us. You watched the video. You know this.”

“I am partially at fault,” I say softly. Yes, both Pete and Franklin watched the same video, but trauma can have a large effect on how a person receives information. Pete believed what I said on the video, Franklin clearly did not. “Before touching any of you, I was aware that it would bond you to me. What I did was impulsive and selfish and it’s something I deeply regret, but I am committed to making it right.”

Pete shifts closer, full of empathy and fighting the urge to hug me to him. Franklin’s hands fist against his temples, and I feel the battle raging inside him. The bond is strong and hits on an emotional level as well. He wants nothing to do with me because . . . because of something he won’t let himself think about. Oh, my God, I’m doing exactly what he’s asking me not to . . . I’m in his head, even if it’s silently.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly.

There is a visible tremor in his hands as he lowers them to his sides and my heart hurts for him. He looks from me to Pete. “I want to talk to Hugh.”

I nod. “Okay.”

After taking out my phone, I pause and send a thought to Pete. *Franklin needs your support more than I do. I’m fine.*

Pete's eyes darken, but then he smiles. *You're a beautiful person, Lauren, inside and out—and recognizing that has nothing to do with our chemical bond.*

I blush and call Hugh, putting him on video chat. He answers immediately. I hand the phone to Pete. He may not have used one before, but these men are smart and excel at rolling with the unexpected. He holds the phone up to his face. "Franklin and I have returned and are up to speed on the events leading to this point. We request that you gather the others and rendezvous here ASAP."

Hugh's response is clear and strong. "Roger that. ETA thirty minutes."

"Understood."

In a gentler tone, Hugh adds, "Can Franklin hear me?"

"Yes," Franklin responds. Pete turns the phone so they can both see the screen.

Hugh continues, "The first day is the worst. We're in a situation that requires we keep this op tight and blend in. I'll provide you with everything you'll need to do that. You can trust Lauren. She's on our side."

"Respectfully," Franklin answers, "I require an immediate alternate location."

"Stay put for now. We'll discuss that in person."

"Neither of us are going anywhere." Pete and Franklin exchange a long look.

Franklin huffs. "For thirty minutes." Without saying more, he turns and walks out of the room.

A moment later, Pete lowers his voice. "Don't be late. He's not taking this well."

"Understood. One of us will be there earlier." With that, Hugh ends the call and Pete hands the phone back to me.

For several heartbeats Pete and I stand there, looking at each other. I don't know what else to do, so I let him in. I relive my conversation with Braxton as well as how I felt with Franklin. Shame circles as my feelings get more and more tangled, so I summon my clinical side. Uncomfortable as symptoms are, they never get better when ignored.

"I want to tell you that Braxton isn't good enough for you," Pete says gently, "but I'm afraid he might be."

I shake my head. "At the most, we're friends."

He cocks an eyebrow. “If I hadn’t interrupted, you would have had sex with Franklin.”

I chuckle because he’s not wrong. “It’s been a long time for me and he’s . . . potent.”

“He’d break your heart.”

“He wouldn’t because he’d never come near it. Now, you . . . I’m going to miss you.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. I’m right here and yours if you want me.”

My eyes mist, and I rub a hand over one of them. “It’s not a case of not wanting, Pete.” Once again, I let him in. Words cannot fully express the struggle within me, but our bond allows me to show him. I could take everything he’s willing to give me, and for a while, we could be happy, but it’s not what would be best for either of us. Somewhere out there is a woman who will love him with all the wonder of the young. He’ll be her world and if things go as planned, he’ll be able to have a normal life with her.

“And you? What do you want for yourself?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m waking up to the idea that I may want more than I have.”

“Does that include a good long hug?”

Without hesitation, I step into the circle of his arms and melt against his broad chest. Yes, I’m strong. Yes, I can survive on my own. But, damn, this also feels good.

But not perfect. I close that thought off to him even as I search for what’s missing.

It’s wonderful, but . . . but it doesn’t feel like forever.

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Chapter Eleven

Elliot

Providence, Rhode Island
2024

My mother told me there would be a reckoning at the gates of heaven. Everyone who mocked and mistreated me would be left outside while, finally on two healthy legs, I'd stroll past them into paradise.

She didn't warn me about this place. Empty. Lonely.

If it's a punishment, whoever is delivering it missed a memo. Real suffering was my life before Inkwell. I freely admit what I did in service to my country might have cost me my ticket to a peaceful eternity, but I believed in both the cause and that I could take control of my own destiny—for a price.

I traded a life of pain and pity for a chance to be a hero, and I'd make that choice a hundred more times even if every time landed me in this place. Walking tall, looking a man in the eye and knowing I am not only as good, but faster, stronger, and able to instantly heal . . . even if that experience couldn't last it was worth it.

I begin sorting through jumbled memories. I was celebrating with the unit. We were being awarded medals. Something wasn't right. Suddenly quiet. Ray has something in his hand. He says he's sorry.

There's a flash.

Then nothing.

Until her. The woman who interrupts the emptiness like a faint beacon. She calls to me even now like an angel. I scoff because I don't believe in those anymore.

It's more likely I've taken seriously ill and she's a nurse. Inkwell and the war were nothing more than a dream and only pain and weakness wait

for me if I wake.

Time drags on until the emptiness of this place becomes unbearable. Would going back really be worse? I could see my mother again and my cousins. I could sit and read in the morning sunshine. I didn't attend school past seventh grade. Leaving that setting behind was a relief. Kindness wasn't something I received much from my classmates. Being home allowed me the time to educate myself, which finally gave me a skill people were willing to pay for. It wasn't a lot, but it supplemented my mother's income, and we got by.

That life wasn't enough, though. Not for me. Not when every able-bodied man went off to save the world. When I saw the Inkwell flier with the injured eagle descending for attack and its claim that Uncle Sam needed every bird in the air—I knew there was no other path for me.

If everything I saw after that was nothing more than a fever induced dream, it was a good one and one I don't regret having. Yes, parts of it were terrifying. Yes, I made mistakes but I was strong and brave . . . a hero . . . even if only in my imagination.

She calls to me again on a level I am ill-equipped to deny. Women didn't want the me I became after polio stole my health and my freedom. I understood. The pain was sometimes excruciating so even my personality was adversely affected.

And later? After my transformation? I did attract them, but intimacy was strictly forbidden for reasons I agreed with. The injections made us nearly invincible in battle, but we had to relearn how to interact with normal people. The stronger we became, the more fragile everyone around us was.

Do I stay here or return and face whatever the truth is?

The man I want to be, the one who chose Inkwell and to defend the world wouldn't stay here. He wouldn't hide.

Nothingness is replaced by a softness of something beneath me. I sit straight up and look down. A chest full of medals sparkle from my uniform jacket and I let out a relieved breath. No matter where I am or what awaits me, Inkwell is real. I didn't imagine it. My legs are straight, strong and pain-free.

Thank God.

I look around. There are two empty sleeping bags beside me on the floor. A bed. A desk. A letter beside my leg. I open it, scanning the message

and directions for how to watch a video on something called a tablet if I wake alone.

But I'm not. There's a hum of voices nearby. I jump to my feet, straighten my jacket, and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Nothing about me has changed. Not my short hair, straight posture, or even the scar that runs through one eyebrow, over the bridge of my nose and across one cheek. I resented that imperfection at first, even asked Inkwell if they'd give me injections again. They refused, claiming it was too dangerous for us. I suspected it was because they didn't need us to be stronger or faster at healing than we were.

I made the mistake of feeling sorry for myself in front of Ray. Even if life has evolved on other planets, I doubt anywhere in the universe there is a creature less sympathetic to weakness than Ray. He said something, though, that changed the way I felt about my scar. He told me to decide if it's a badge of shame or honor and then fucking live with my decision.

I'm not ashamed of it anymore. I earned that scar. It's mine and proof that I was not afraid even when death danced around us. The shrapnel that sliced through my skull would have killed the average man, but I'm not average. I work for Inkwell and I'm a hero.

With that last thought in my head, I leave the bedroom and walk toward the voices. The closer I get to them, the more familiar they become. Hugh. Jack. Ray. Edward. Pete. Franklin. They're all there, along with several women. I smile. This is the opposite of waking to danger.

The room falls silent as I enter.

Jack is the first to greet me. He's dressed in a clothing style that is unfamiliar to me, but I've felt the back-smacking hug he gives me before. He greeted me the same way when I healed and stood after damn near getting my head blown off. "Welcome back," he says warmly.

I push him off me the same way I did that day, but I'm still smiling. "What the fuck is this place?"

"Sounds like you didn't watch the video. If not, you might want to sit down because some of this will be a shock—"

I stop hearing him as soon as I sense her. My head whips to one side and the power of her presence rocks me onto my heels. Never have I looked upon a more beautiful woman nor felt such an immediate bond. I walk away from Jack. As I approach her, Pete steps closer to her—possessively—

and I struggle with the desire to fight him for her. She looks up at him and I hate how they seem to communicate intimately.

“This should be fun to watch,” Ray says.

The woman beside him swiftly moves to block my advance. “Mom, you should leave.”

Mom? A quick assessment confirms they look related.

In a flash, Ray becomes the younger woman’s human shield and says, “I was joking. Lauren and Pete are perfectly safe. Elliot is a million times more sensible than I ever was.”

Hugh joins him. “I’m sorry I doubted you, Lauren. The men are coming back on their own.”

“Coming back from where?” I growl, losing patience. The apartment is full of gadgets I’ve never seen before and something is very off.

The woman who drew me here speaks as she makes her way around the men. “Elliot,” she says softly.

God, she’s beautiful. The masculine attire she’s chosen does nothing to lessen the lure of her. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Small in stature but strong. Her confidence alone makes her a real stunner, but what I feel for her is more than superficial. Everything I’ve overcome, everything I’ve achieved, all of it happened to prepare me for meeting her. “Yes.” Yes, to her, to whatever this is. Just yes.

She comes to stand in front of me. “My name is Lauren. If you trust me to, I can quickly explain all of this to you.” She holds out a hand to me. “In your mind.”

“In my mind?” Impossible as that sounds, I believe she can do anything because she already has me under some sort of spell. I take her hand in mine. “Okay.”

You can close me out at any time, but if you let me in I can show you my memories and you’ll quickly know everything I do about your situation. Her voice is a whisper at first, but becomes clearer as I open myself to her.

Who are you?

Are you ready to see?

I take a deep breath first. *Yes.*

And then—holy shit, I’m catapulted into her thoughts and memories. It should have been chaotic but she guides me through them quickly and with an efficiency that’s somewhat clinical. I don’t have time to digest how I feel about any of what I learn from her and that isn’t what this is about. Like a

tactical briefing, she brings me fully up to date on what she knows about what was done to us, how long we were in the silverware, the cellular differences between us and humans as well as the ways she is hoping to help us.

I look away for a moment.

It's a lot to take in.

I've landed in the future and Inkwell has not only lied to us but tried to kill us off as well.

With resolve, I meet Lauren's gaze again. *Everything. Tell me everything that's happened since.*

She shows me Hugh, explains the method Mercedes used to bring him back and that they've fallen in love. The bond, she explains, is somehow a result of the transformation or possibly the drug they once gave us to control us. She's not sure. Jack and Cheryl as well as Ashley and Ray are similarly bonded. Each became a couple after returning.

I shouldn't have touched three of you at once, Lauren admits.

Resentment isn't possible when she takes me to the moment, she first held us: me, Pete, and Franklin. She'd been hurt and stood strong and alone for so long, telling herself that what she had was enough . . . I'd done the same.

Show me only what you're comfortable with, she says in my thoughts.

I'm not ready yet, so I close the door to my past and ask her to show me what happened after she took us home. *Did you wake us the way the other women woke their men?*

The women I'd known would have been embarrassed by the question, but Lauren wasn't. She showed me not only how they'd woken but also the connection she felt for both Pete and Franklin. She let me see how each of them had responded differently to the bond. I wasn't surprised. A long time ago, while still under the influence of the drug they'd given all of us, Franklin had confessed to me why he'd joined Inkwell and about how Susie had betrayed him. It was a source of shame for him and the reason he treated women like they were nothing. Inkwell regrew his leg, but it didn't heal the part of him she'd broken.

That explains a lot, Lauren says.

As I wander through the experiences she's had with Pete, I suck in a breath. *He's falling for you hard.*

I feel a wave of sadness from her, and it's poignantly sincere. *I'll cure him before that happens.*

In that moment I understand not just the chemical side of the bond, but also why Pete isn't fighting it. I can see into Lauren's very soul, and as I peel layer after layer back all I discover is love. Love for her children. Love for humanity and those who suffer. Even robots, although I'm not entirely sure what they are. The only fear I find in her is of failure . . . failure to be enough for those who depend on her. And . . . and . . . the fear of trusting a man with her heart again . . . of allowing herself to need someone . . . and have them leave her the way the father of her children did.

I pull her to my chest and hug her. There is a commotion around us, but we block it out. It would be so easy to kiss her, to claim her as my own.

That's the bond talking, she whispers in my mind.

You make it sound like we're impaired by it.

It is heady.

I tuck her beneath my chin. *It sure is.*

We stand there, simply breathing each other in. When I release her, I'll have to face all I've learned. For now, I want to soak in the peace she brings to the eye of this storm.

Hugh and the others will support you through this. Even without me, you're not alone.

Knowing, I mean *knowing*, how determined she is to free us from her saddens me on more than one level. Selfishly, I don't want to lose this feeling, but I also don't want her to return to being alone.

Who's Braxton? I ask.

She stiffens in my arms. *A friend.*

She won't show me her memories of him, but perhaps by accident, she reveals what Pete thinks about Braxton and what she's shared with him. *Lauren.*

Yes?

I need to know.

The wall around her feelings for Braxton and all her memories of him falls away. As I sort through them, I'm conflicted in the same way I bet Pete is. Braxton loves Lauren, but her heart is well-defended. She allows herself to care about people but not need them.

And yet, she intends to move all of us to his campground home. That's a huge step. I'm both happy for her and protective of her. I've killed men

with my bare hands. If Braxton so much as offends her, I'll crush him like a tiny bug beneath my foot.

Lauren tips her head back, her eyes wide. *Don't hurt anyone in my name. Ever.*

I look away.

I don't make promises I can't keep.

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Chapter Twelve

Lauren

NEVER DID I imagine I would get comfortable enough with the bonding process to be able to see it as a tool. When I saw Elliot's confusion and was aware of how much he'd need to be told, I knew I could help him in a way the others might not be able to. Ray spoke inside my head once and tried to get me to trust him, but my connection to Pete and Franklin is so much deeper.

Even as Elliot steps away from me and our physical connection is broken, I can feel the goodness in him. He's not an easy read the way Pete was, but also not as defensive as Franklin. There are parts of him he isn't comfortable sharing with me, and that's okay. I achieved my goal of both informing and reassuring him.

I glance at Pete. He's watching me quietly, his mind closed to mine. That's probably for the best. I don't want to hurt him.

Forcing myself to attend to the logistics of the situation, I look around and say, "Considering we now know the initial contact is all that's required to bring members of your unit back, I suggest we move everyone, including those still dormant to a location where you can all be together. Not permanently, but while you bring the rest of them back, I believe it's best that you're there to support each man as he returns."

"You have someplace in mind?" Hugh asks.

Ray looks far from pleased. "Like a facility where we can be contained and tested?"

Pete instantly rushes to my defense. "You can apologize now or after I feed those words back through your teeth."

It doesn't help the situation that Elliot walks over to flank Pete in support. They look to Franklin, who raises his hands and says, "I'm not in

this."

Jack moves between Ray and the others. "Ray's concerns are valid, but his delivery could have been better." He meets my gaze. "Lauren, where do you suggest we relocate to?"

"And can I bring Mike?" Mercedes interjects.

"Will we be welcome there?" John asks quietly from a distance.

George adds, "I hope we don't end up back in luggage."

Although I believe having them all in one place will benefit them, I hadn't considered how it might affect each of them differently. The tone I choose is one that has soothed many nervous patients over the years. "A friend of mine owns a campground on Bowdish Lake. It has both a large home and several outbuildings. Everyone would be welcome there. The location would allow for both privacy as well as space to explore how your abilities have or have not been affected by your time as silverware. It will also allow me to put together an on-site lab where I can do the testing that helping you will require."

"Who do we know that owns a campground, Mom?" Ashley asks.

My mouth dries. "Braxton."

"Birthday-Card-Braxton?"

"Yes." My smile is sad because that's what she and Ryan call him. They used to ask if he was their father because they couldn't imagine another reason why he never forgot to celebrate them.

"No one is supposed to know about us," Edward says harshly. "How much have you told him?"

"I told him Ashley asked me to take in some friends who have recently left an unhealthy situation. He offered me his camp." I understand Edward's concern. Having returned so long ago, he's survived by staying under the radar. It must be unsettling to suddenly feel exposed and no longer in control.

"Won't he be curious and want to come by?" Ashley asks.

"He's in Ireland this week."

"And after that?" Ray counters.

"I'll handle him," I promise.

"Like you're handling them?" Ray waves in the direction of Pete and Elliot.

Ashley steps in front of him, places one hand on his chest and has what I can only assume is a heated, private conversation. I tense because I know

Ray's potential for violence. Not toward her. Never toward her. But all of these men are under a crushing amount of stress. People, even good people, can crack in that kind of situation. Beneath her touch, his expression softens and his head lowers. When he looks up, I see only humility and regret in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Lauren," he says quietly. "I know we can trust you and I'm grateful for everything you've done—are still doing for us. Unlearning old habits is hard."

There was definitely a time when I thought my daughter was making a huge mistake by getting involved with Ray, but the longer I know him, the more good I see in him. I walk over to him, lay my hand on his arm, and let him feel my growing affection for him.

His eyes fill with tears that he instantly blinks away. All he wants is to be good enough for Ashley, and he is. I let him experience how deeply I believe that. I wouldn't be a mother if I didn't also caution him to hold onto this side of himself through the storm we all know is coming.

Likely because Ashley's hand is still on his chest, she receives the messages as well. A moment later, I'm fighting for breath as she nearly hugs the life out of me. "I love you so much, Mom."

"I love you too," I murmur against her hair.

When she releases me, she searches my face. "Braxton is your age, isn't he?"

"Stop." I wave a hand between us.

"Rich. Good-looking."

"Ashley Anne."

Usually, that stops her, but this time, she chuckles and continues shamelessly. "Three men aren't enough?"

I roll my eyes heavenward and pray for patience. "Do you think we could discuss this at another time?"

She shrugs. "My mother, the hussy. I don't know whether to lecture or applaud you."

I laugh because after so many years of celibacy the idea that I might be considered anything other than dusty tickles me. Ashley joins in. Something about her laughing amuses me even more. We're cackling and wiping tears of laughter from our eyes while everyone else looks on.

"Do you think they're okay?" Cheryl asks.

Mercedes says, “More than okay. I think they needed us as much as we needed them.”

After gasping for air and straightening, I look around until I spot the frightened spider robots. They’re peeping out from beneath the couch. I sit on the floor and beckon them. They scurry to me and I scoop them up to my chest. “I do need you, all of you, and I’m grateful you’ve come into my life.” Slowly I stand with the little robots in my arms. I feel Pete’s warm gaze on me. Elliot’s eyes are wide like he can’t believe what he’s seeing. And Franklin? He’s brooding on the far side of the room.

He doesn’t want to come with us to the camp.

I’m realistic enough to know I can’t fix everyone. I tip my head toward Franklin. Pete nods. He’ll help Franklin sort himself out.

From across the room, Pete whispers in my thoughts. *You won’t be able to keep Braxton away.*

I know.

This could get messy.

It isn’t already? We exchange a smile and my heart skips a beat. *Messy. Complicated. Conditions often get worse just before they get better.*

“I have an idea,” Mercedes announces. “Since Lauren seems capable of bringing the men back without having sex with them, wouldn’t it make sense that she should bring the rest of them back?”

I bark out a laugh then freeze when I realize no one else finds that idea as ludicrous as I do.

Pete’s expression is tight and I ache for him. I seek to reassure him. *I’d never do that.*

He runs a hand down his face. *You are a kindhearted, honest, dedicated soul. I hate that Braxton exists. I hate sharing you with Franklin and Elliot. But I agree that you might be the best person to bring the rest of the men back. You want nothing from us and are committed to neutralizing the bond. Hugh, Jack, and Ray found healthy love, but that’s not guaranteed for the rest. In the wrong hands, the attachment we feel for the one who wakes us could be weaponized. As much as it guts me to say . . . Mercedes is right. You’re the one who should bring the others back.*

I look around the room. The silence is heavy as they wait for my response. When one squirms, my attention is drawn to the little robots in my arms. Do they sense the battle raging in me? I feel like someone standing on the edge of an abyss . . . teetering and afraid. The first time I

bonded it was a spontaneous decision and one that has been accompanied by more than a little guilt. To those around me, I say, “There must be a better way. We should leave them dormant until I’ve figured out how to counteract the bonding process.”

Elliot comes to stand beside me. When he speaks, it’s aloud. “I don’t claim to understand what’s going on here, but I trust you. Pete’s right, the risk of our hearts being broken shouldn’t take priority over the risk of letting the wrong person bond with us.”

I shake my head and silently ask, *You can hear both of us?*

Unfortunately, yes. He continues aloud, “I’ve seen a lot of ugly things and sadly I know what people are capable of. This won’t be easy for you, especially since you hurt when we do. I don’t want to share you either, but the men you wake will come to understand why this was the best option for them.”

I seek out Franklin. When our eyes meet I ask, “What do you think?”

He shrugs. “I don’t care how many men you wake.”

I press my lips together momentarily as I weigh if I should push him further. He’s closed off to everyone and that means he’s not hearing what we’re sharing silently. “Help us help them. Consent isn’t possible, so it’s up to us to make a careful and thought-out judgment before we proceed. Your opinion matters.”

“You didn’t trap us in the silverware. I don’t trust you, but I don’t know you.” Franklin pushes off the wall and walks over to stand beside Hugh. “I’ve followed you into hell and back. What do you think?”

Hugh takes a moment before answering. He gathers Mercedes to his side. “I don’t want to be free of what I’ve found here.” He kisses the top of her head. “That being said, the men who are still trapped in the silverware are in a vulnerable position. If we wake them with Lauren, there will initially be a period of confusion, but we’re here to guide them through it. If we postpone their return or leave it to chance, the risk to all of us is undeterminable. I trust Lauren and believe she’s the best option.”

Arm around Cheryl, Jack nods. “I do as well.”

Ray takes Ashley’s hand. “This is an uncomfortable enough conversation that I’m tempted to make a joke, but there’s really nothing funny about this. We have five men depending on us and although I’m grateful for Ashley, we don’t have time to play matchmaker for them. I say we move to the campground and in the safety of that setting, Lauren brings

them back. I can't speak for the remaining men, but I'd rather be given an unpleasant choice than no choice at all."

Edward nods in agreement.

George spins and beeps, ensuring our attention shifts to him. "For anyone who's concerned, I can confirm that there hasn't been a bit of sex here since we arrived. After scrolling through Lauren's digital calendar and journal, I can confirm she's been celibate for years. The soldiers will be safe with her."

Ashley groans. "George, you promised to be good while you're here."

George spins toward me. "I didn't watch her dress or take a shower."

"And I thank you for that." I choke a bit then say, "You shouldn't look at someone's private accounts, George. That's another boundary you shouldn't cross."

"So you don't want to know that your phone service double charged you for fees two months in a row? Or that you never did receive the refund you were promised for the shoes you returned online?"

My mouth rounds, and I change my mind. "We'll talk later, George."

His lights flash, and he beeps happily.

In my mind, Pete jokes, *Years?*

Stop, I answer.

Elliot chimes in. *How many? More or less than a decade?*

I will kick both of your asses and not feel bad at all.

They both grin at me, and I laugh because all of this is insane. Every last bit of it.

Five more?

Really, at this point, bring 'em on.

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Chapter Thirteen

Braxton

"How's Crumlin?" my brother Cole asks via a video chat as he places his phone in the middle of the table so I can see my niece Julia while we talk.

She waves to me. "Uncle Brax! Guess what I'm doing today? Guess!"

I loosen my tie and step out of my shoes. After a long day, returning to my hotel room feels good. So does seeing the face of a child who isn't scared or in pain. "You're driving everyone to school?"

She giggles at that. "I'm six. I can't drive yet."

"You're staying home to teach your goldfish how to fly?"

A huge smile accompanies another giggle. "You're silly, Uncle Brax."

"Maybe, so help me out. What are you doing today?"

"Allen invited a girl to the park. I get to go with them. I'm their chaperone."

"You're not coming, Julia," Allen says in a pained voice. "Mom was joking."

"She was not," Julia protests.

"She was," Allen argues. "Dad, tell Julia she's not coming to the park today."

Smoothly, Cole says, "Don't worry. I'll take Julia to the park, Allen. You and your friend can walk around on your own."

"Wait," Allen sputters. "You're coming, too? Dad!"

"We talked about this, Allen."

I hold back a smile more successfully than Julia does. She leans closer to the phone and stage whispers. "Allen thinks he's old enough to have a girlfriend, but he's still in puberty."

A pancake flies out of nowhere and lands on her chest. She tosses it back across the table.

In the background, I hear Cole’s oldest, Henry, tell Allen to apologize.

Allen refuses.

Cole tells them all to calm down.

Julia speaks to me again, “Mom says puberty makes boys emotional so I should be nice, but I threw the pancake back anyway.”

I raise my voice. “Cole, I see taking over the morning shift with the kids is working out splendidly.”

He laughs. “I imagined breakfast being easier than picking them up from school. I was wrong—Don’t!” He barks in a military tone that would send chills through most people, but his kids smile and laugh in response to it. They know, with them at least, there is no bite. When he speaks again his tone is softer. “Everyone, eat or go get ready for school. I’m going to step away and talk to Uncle Braxton . . . and you will get along while I do.”

Henry is the first to agree, probably because they all wisely understand when their father gets quiet, the fun is over.

Julia makes a face then nods.

Allen doesn’t agree to anything, but he also doesn’t protest.

I wave to all of them just before being carried into the other room by Cole. Once alone, Cole sighs in exasperation. “I don’t know how Kelly does it. She says it’s important to allow Julia to choose her own clothing, but the outfits are supposed to be clean and match. Julia and I haven’t successfully achieved that, not once so far.”

“Have you asked Kelly to switch back?”

“No, she says she gets her best writing done in the morning and her book is nearly finished. She’s always supported me. I’m happy to do this for her. Even if I’m not yet doing as well as she would.”

“Have you asked her for tips or tricks?”

He chuckles. “And admit defeat? Never.”

I smile at that. Cole and Kelly have been together since high school. They bicker like their children do, but they’re happy and I love that for them. When I started making a lot of money, I offered to help them financially. They refused.

Teddy did as well.

I come from a proud, hardworking family. If they ever need anything from me, they know I’ll help them without hesitation. They’re the same with me. If I lost everything I’d never be homeless. They’d take me in, then kick my ass until I got back on my feet again.

That’s what family does.

Cole interrupts my thoughts. “You never answered me—how’s the trip?”

“It’s good. I’ve toured the renovations to the pediatric burn unit. They’re substantial and were really needed. While here, I’ve set up funding for an expansion of the on-site accommodations for parents. The HSE has agreed to match our contributions with additional funding. So far, the trip has been productive.”

“Kelly told me to tell you Irish women are known for being strong, witty, and resilient, but she doesn’t want you to meet one if that means you’ll move there.”

“No worries about that happening. Besides, you know I always keep things casual.”

“You’re getting up there in years. You sure you don’t want to reconsider that policy?”

I imagine Lauren’s smiling face. “I would for the right woman.”

“If you haven’t met her yet, I’d say the problem is you and not the available selection.” When I don’t respond, Cole continues, “Unless you’ve already met her. Have you?”

“Maybe.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Sure, not to you, but wait until I tell Kelly what you said and she demands a name.”

I laugh at that. “You could *not* tell her.”

“Sure. If I tried to keep something like that from her, all she’d have to do is look me in the eye and she’ll know. Then we’ll both be in trouble.”

“Both? Why me?”

“Because I’d rat you out and say it’s your fault I couldn’t say anything.”

He would too. “You could tell her there is nothing substantial enough to discuss, but if there ever is, I’ll call her first.”

Cole makes a face. “That may hold her off. Not sure. Is this woman you won’t name someone we know?”

“I’ve spoken about her.”

“You never talk about the women you date.” He gasps. “The only woman you’ve ever told me about is the one you haven’t dated. The one

Teddy used to think would be perfect for you. What was her name? Laura? Leonore?"

"Lauren. Her name is Lauren."

"The EMT who helped Teddy."

"She's a doctor now."

"So, she's smart. Is she married?"

"No."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"When I first met her, she was with someone."

"Twenty years ago?"

"A bit more than that, but yes."

"And then?"

"Then I had my accident. You know I wasn't in a good place for a long time after that."

"That's the truth."

"By the time I looked her up again, she was a doctor with no interest in me or any other man."

"She's a lesbian?"

I shake my head. "I don't believe so. I've never seen her with anyone."

"Then why don't you shoot your shot?"

"I have. About a million times. She always turns me down."

"You need to move on, buddy. Find someone who's into you."

"Don't you think I've tried to? There's just something about her. I'd rather be a small part of her life than a large part of anyone else's."

"Holy shit, you love her."

I shrug. "I guess I do."

He's stunned into silence for a blissful moment. "Have you ever told her how you feel?"

"No."

"Then you haven't really shot your shot."

I look away for a moment. My brothers and I give each other a lot of shit, but we keep things honest. "She's already not interested. Imagine if she saw how I look below the neck."

Cole whistles. "She's a doctor. Do you really think she'll judge you for your burns?"

Women have—many of them over the years. Some have been willing to pretend it didn't bother them, but there's a reason I don't swim shirtless at

the campground with my family. Despite many skin grafts and reconstructive surgeries, the best way to describe my chest and abdomen is . . . *painful to look at*.

That doesn't stop me from having sex with women, but I've learned to keep a T-shirt on when I do. There's nothing romantic about the unnatural feel and folds of the skin my suits conceal.

Do I think Lauren will be repulsed by them? "I don't want to know."

Neither of us speaks for a moment, then he says, "I get it. What happened to you sucks, and not everyone can deal with that. Maybe you're right. Maybe she'll take one look at your sorry ass of a body and run screaming."

"Cole—"

"Or, hear me out; maybe you'll discover you've been a pussy all these years and thank me for pushing you to step up and tell her how you feel."

"Dad, what's a pussy?" Julia asks.

"Shit, I have to go. Think about what I said, Braxton." With that, he ends the call, and I'm left in silence. For years, I've told myself I held back from telling Lauren how I feel about her because I didn't want to pressure her. Was it also about me?

What happened to me did suck, but Cole has scars as well, both mental and physical, and Kelly hasn't left him yet. I need to stop making excuses.

If Cole survives Kelly finding out he taught Julia a new bad word, I will hopefully have to thank him for pushing me to finally do something about how I feel about Lauren.

It's time to be honest with her.

In person.

As soon as I get back from this trip.

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Chapter Fourteen

Lauren

Braxton's Campground

SEEKING A MOMENT of sanity, I step out onto the lower level of a double-decker wrap-around porch and breathe in the fresh evening air. The view of the lake is framed by a lush green lawn and trees turning vibrant colors. I wrap my arms around myself as the wind brings a hint of chill.

The door behind me opens and closes. "Mom? How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," I answer automatically.

Ashley hugs me, laying her head on my shoulder briefly. "It's okay to not be."

I hug her back and admit, "I haven't felt uncertain of myself in a very long time. When I originally chose my career over your father, I worried it had been a selfish decision. I believe in the value of a strong family unit. I wanted you to have that, but—"

"You had a calling to heal people. If he truly loved you he would have embraced that side of you too." Her expression tightens. "We were and are better off without him. I can't love a man, even if his sperm made it possible for me to be here, if I don't respect him."

I nod, then turn to look out over the water again. There's a peacefulness here despite the toys, bikes, and canoes stacked in every corner of it. A well-used fire pit surrounded by Adirondack chairs is mirrored on the other side of the lawn by an impressive-sized wooden playground built around a treehouse. Braxton said his family gathers here, and evidence of them enjoying spending time together is everywhere. What would my life have been like had I chosen a man like him to have a family with?

“So,” Ashley says slowly, “Braxton set us up. Every fridge is stocked. He filled one of the cabins with so much lab equipment I’d be surprised if you need any of what Cheryl brought.”

“I saw.”

“You didn’t tell him what we need it for?”

“I told him I couldn’t.”

“I spoke to Ray about Braxton. If he was someone we’d just met, involving him would be dangerous, but I don’t remember a time before Braxton.” When I don’t say anything, she adds, “Why have you never dated him?”

“It’s not like that with us.”

Her tone fills with humor. “I bet if you gave him any encouragement at all, it quickly would be.”

My chin rises. “Pete believes Braxton is in love with me.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I haven’t let myself put much thought into it.”

“Because you’re scared?”

After inhaling sharply, I answer, “Maybe.”

“Oh, Mom. Any man would be lucky to have you in his life.”

I steep in my feelings, my face crumpling as I face an ugly truth. “What would you think if I said I chose to touch the silverware because I wanted someone to love me, and I knew they wouldn’t have a choice but to?”

Ashley sniffs loudly. “I’d say welcome to healing. You’ve closed people out for so long. It’s past time to let someone in.”

“It was a selfish decision.”

“Mom, whose standards are you trying to live up to? No one is perfect. Do you think any of us know what we’re doing? I took Ray home mostly as a joke, but also because I wanted someone of my own too. Ray is a little old-fashioned, extremely protective and I’d never say it in public, but I kind of love that about him.” She puts an arm around me. “As far as feeling guilty, Pete, Franklin, and Elliot admire you. The men you’ll bring back tonight eventually will as well. Do you know how I know that? Because you are amazing, and I’m not just saying that because you’re my mom.”

How could I not smile with gratitude at that? “Thank you. You’re pretty amazing too. And I’m not just saying that because I’m your mother.” I blink back emotion. After a pause, I say, “I told Braxton I’d call him once we settled in. It’s probably too late to.”

“Mom?”

“Yes.”

“Give the man a chance.”

I snort. “You can say that now? In the middle of this? When I’m about to fill the house with five more men who’ll be enamored with me?”

She hugs me closer. “We’re staying at Braxton’s house. You’ve already involved him. And really, what’s one more?”

I’m still shaking my head a moment after she walks into the house. I take out my phone and call Braxton. I start with, “If you’re in bed just say so and I can call back tomorrow.”

His chuckle is deep and I warm all over as it tickles my ear. “I am in bed, but don’t let that ever stop you from joining me.” He clears his throat. “*Calling* me.”

I smile at that. “Always the flirt.”

“Only with you.”

My heart flutters in my chest. Could he mean that? “How was your day?”

“Productive.”

Usually this is where I’d pivot the conversation, but I don’t know if I want to close him out anymore. “What did you do?”

Without hesitation, he walks me through the meetings he arranged and how happy he is with the renovations. There’s humble pride in his voice when he shares how he secured additional funding from the HSE. “I’m sorry,” he says in a rush. “I didn’t mean to go on and on.”

“No, I’m glad you did. Is your focus always on burn units?”

He’s quiet for a moment then says, “My career as a firefighter came to an abrupt halt when we were called to the home of a prepper who sadly kept extremely flammable liquids within his home. There was a flashover that went beyond what my bodygear could protect me from. Luckily, my third-degree burns were contained to my chest and upper arms.”

“Luckily,” I echoed in a sad whisper.

“I lost the next few years to skin grafts and reconstructive surgery. My expensive suits hide a lot of creative landscape.” His voice is tight and the joke falls flat.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. I survived and good things have come from the experience. I wouldn’t be where I am, doing what I’m doing, if I

hadn’t gone through that.”

And somehow, despite those challenges, he’s consistently found ways to bring smiles to me and my children. “The campground is amazing. It’s beautiful. And then all the food. The lab equipment. It’s too much, but it’s also exactly what we needed. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. When I return, I’d like to come see you there.”

Not only did it feel wrong to say no, but I didn’t want to. Still, he needed some kind of heads-up. “Braxton, things here are complicated.”

“In what way?”

“So, so many ways.”

“Would it help to talk about it?”

“Not over the phone.” I groan and lower my voice. “Braxton, the situation is potentially a dangerous one. I’ve involved you already by bringing everyone to your home and I’m wrestling with that. You don’t have to get pulled in deeper. I’d still respect you if you wanted to wait until this shitstorm passes before we . . . we . . .”

“Hold on. There’s a lot to unwrap here. First of all, if you are working yourself up to asking me on a date, the answer is yes.”

I laugh at that because I kind of was. “Whew, glad we have the hard part resolved.”

His tone remains serious. “As far as you potentially being in danger, there’s nothing in Ireland that can’t be handled by phone. I just texted my pilot. We’ll talk about the rest in person tomorrow.”

“Oh, oh.” I clench the phone. “Tomorrow?”

“Only because teleportation isn’t yet a thing.”

“This isn’t a joke, Braxton.”

“Good, because I’m serious. Should I come armed?”

“No. Yes. Maybe.” God, I hadn’t expected him to drop everything and return. “How can you agree to help without having any idea what we’re doing?”

“Because I know you, Lauren. This was important enough for you to take time away from the hospital. Whatever you’re doing, I’m all in.”

“Even if I’m out here burying bodies on your property?”

“Just don’t mess up the front lawn; I worked hard to get it that nice.”

I sigh. “Braxton.”

“Lauren.”

“Your view of the world and how it works will forever be changed if you come here. Are you okay with that?”

“Do you want me there?”

Whoosh, that’s a question I’m not prepared for. Had he asked me if I needed him I would have quickly denied that I did. Needing anyone is hard for me. But want him? Could I admit that much?

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Then I’m on my way.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Lauren

A SHOWER AND more than one cup of coffee are not enough to counter how little sleep I was able to get the night before. I'm seated at one end of a long kitchen table, pretending I'm not the focus of so much male attention.

The five men seated across from me bonded with me last night when I held each utensil then laid them out on the floor and called them to me. They've had time to change into normal clothing and be fully updated on their situation.

Unfortunately, they are all devoted to me. I can hear their voices in my head and my senses are overloading from being as turned on as I am for as long as I have been.

Pete is leaning against the island with Elliot and Franklin by his side. They all look painfully amused by the situation. I clear my throat and put a ring of authority in my voice. "This morning, I'll be taking blood samples from everyone and comparing them. We'll isolate whatever it is that is causing the bond; then I'll work on neutralizing it." No one says a word; they all keep looking adoringly at me. "We'll get through this."

A cacophony of voices assaults my thoughts, too many to unjumble. I raise my hand. "Moving forward, it would be best if we close our minds to each other. I need to be able to concentrate and this is . . . it's too much."

Ray enters the kitchen and surveys the group. "Oh, man. I'd laugh, but this is tough to watch."

I stand. "I'm glad you're here. I'll need a fresh blood sample from you, Hugh, and Jack. I'll compare them against the ones I've already collected from you and the others. Hopefully, something will stand out."

"Anything you need," Ray says without hesitation. "Is now a bad time to tell you a truck just pulled up the driveway? Looks like your friend is

here.”

Oh, shit. Shit. To the men around the table, I say, “I’m going to need a few minutes. I know this will be confusing for you. It’s confusing for me, too. But could we all try to be civil? No matter how we feel. Remind yourself I am too old for you, and there are so many amazing women out there who you’ll soon be free to meet.”

Good luck, Pete says in my head.

The intense look he gives me makes my heart ache, but the attachment we feel won’t remain. He’s a wonderful man who’ll find love with another woman someday. And I’ll be there, happy for them. *Thank you.*

As I rush out of the room, Ray falls into step beside me. “He’s not alone.”

I trip as I absorb that, but Ray catches my arm and rights me. “Who’s with him?”

“They look like him and they’re all packing.”

Oh, no. “He has two brothers.” I groan. “I shouldn’t have told him we might be in danger. I didn’t think he’d involve them.” We stop at the door and I scan Ray’s face. Of all the men, he’s the one I least want Braxton to clash with. “He’s here to help.”

Ray nods. “I don’t hate that he brought reinforcements. I would have.”

“He’s a good man, Ray.”

“He’d better be.”

After taking a fortifying breath, I open the door. I wouldn’t have imagined Braxton owning one gun, but he and the two men with him each have one. Ray takes a protective stance at my side.

I force a bright smile. “Braxton. Welcome.”

He assesses Ray briefly before addressing me. “I planned to come alone, but my family tends to roll together. Lauren, this is Teddy, the brother you’ve met, and this is Cole.”

I swallow hard and clasp my hands nervously in front of me. “Hello. Thank you for coming.” I glance at Ray then say, “This is Ashley’s . . . partner, Ray.”

Braxton offers a hand to shake, and I hold my breath. Ray could crush every bone in Braxton if he wants to. Ray leans forward and shakes Braxton’s hand with restraint. I breathe out my relief.

“Nice to meet you, Ray.” Braxton watches him intently. Does he sense what the rest of us know about Ray? “Without knowing what we’d be

walking into, we thought it was best to come prepared for anything."

Ray smirks. "No way you're prepared for this."

"Ray," I say his name in reprimand then soften my tone. "Please let me do the talking."

Ray folds his arms across his chest. "Talk away."

Nothing I say will get him to stand down, so I give up trying. "Why don't we all move to the living room where we can sit? What I need to tell you will take a bit."

As Braxton moves, his holstered gun jostles at his side. "Lead the way."

Ray's eyes narrow. We both know the weapons wouldn't be enough to stop him. I silently plead for him to control himself.

Moments later, I sit on a couch and encourage Braxton and his brothers to as well. Teddy does. Cole remains standing.

Ray chooses to stand right behind Braxton. He and Cole exchange a look. "You serve?" Ray asks.

"Army. Two tours of Afghanistan. You?"

Ray slowly blinks. "Special Ops. No branch affiliation."

Cole nods. "You out?"

"That's the goal."

I turn my attention back to Braxton. He doesn't know what he's walked into, but he's cool and composed. This is a man who has faced death and won. He just might be able to handle what I'm about to tell him.

I take a deep breath and plunge right in. "In World War II there was an organization called Inkwell. They were a classified program that conducted experiments on men who had been medically disqualified from enlisting. The goal was to not only heal these men, but to turn them into super soldiers who could round up Germany's top scientists and acquire the means to make an atomic bomb."

So far so good. Both Braxton and his brothers are listening intently. I pause to choose how to explain the next parts. "After achieving this goal, Inkwell gathered these men together in one location and attempted to eliminate them. Thankfully, one of the soldiers was able to modify the weapon meant to kill them and by doing so . . ." This is where I'll lose them. "Somehow trapped them within silverware."

"Trapped them?" Braxton asks, his expression giving nothing away.

"Yes. Blending the soldiers and the metal on a molecular level, essentially inducing stasis. Ray is one of those men."

Braxton looks from me to Ray and back. I recognize the careful expression on his face as the same one I would give a patient I decided to humor while trying to get to the truth in their story. “Okay.”

“Ashley’s friend Mercedes accidently brought one back.”

Braxton keeps his eyes glued to Ray as he asks, “What does that mean?”

I answer, “Changed him from a fork into a man again.”

One of Braxton’s eyebrows rises, and he waits as if I’m about to say I’m joking. When I don’t, he turns to look at Cole and Teddy. I don’t blame them for thinking I’ve lost my mind. I thought something similar when Ashley tried to explain this to me. “Ray, show them.”

“No,” Ray says forcefully. “I’m not a dog. I don’t perform tricks.”

He doesn’t trust them yet. That’s understandable as well.

Braxton takes one of my hands in his. “I know work has been stressful lately. Everything will be okay.”

Oh, God, he thinks I’ve had a breakdown.

I stand. “I didn’t believe Ashley until I saw proof. Come with me. I’ll give you all the evidence you need, then I’ll tell you the rest.”

Braxton stands. I understand the sympathy in his gaze as he joins me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to shake him and tell him to just trust me. “I’m not crazy,” I say.

“I never said you were,” he says softly.

I raise a hand in a plea for him to stop talking. Having him near me is straining my overloaded senses. The men in the other room are calling to me. I want to go to them so badly I ache, but I don’t want to leave Braxton. It’s tearing me apart emotionally, and my body’s response is to begin to shake.

“Hey,” Braxton whispers. “Whatever is going on here, you don’t have to face it alone.” He pulls me to him, enveloping me in his strength. The noise in my head quiets. Slowly, my body stops shaking. I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes.

This is how love is supposed to be.

Loyal.

Unwavering.

Kind even when tested.

Is it selfish of me to reap the benefit of a love I’ve done nothing to earn? I’ve chosen to put my life at risk, but I never meant to endanger Braxton

and his family. I could recant my story, tell him it was an elaborate prank that I realize now isn't funny.

I don't want to lie to him.

And I don't want him to leave.

For once, I don't want to go into battle alone.

I lift my head and note that we are being closely watched by all in the room. "Do you mind if we step into the hall? Talk alone for a moment?"

"Of course." There's nothing beyond concern and support in his tone. "We'll be right back," he announces, then, with a hand on my lower back, ushers me out of the room.

"It means so much to me that you came."

"But?"

As I look up into his eyes, I don't know what the right thing to do is. "Are you in love with me?" I blurt out.

His easy smile takes me by surprise. "Was naming the burn unit after your favorite flower what gave me away?"

My mouth drops open. "Sunflower Burn Center. I thought you chose the theme to be bright and non-threatening to the pediatric patients."

"That too."

What does that mean? "Did you donate the center to the hospital so you could spend time with me?"

He traces my jaw with his thumb before sliding his fingers into my hair and tucking a loose curl behind my ear. "Two things can be true at once. Providence needed a pediatric burn center, and I wanted to spend time with you."

I chew my bottom lip as I realize how obtuse I'd been. "Why do you think sunflowers are my favorite?"

His eyebrows rise. "They're not?"

"I'm not really a flower person. I did wonder why you sent me the same bouquet every year for my birthday. I thought perhaps you had your assistant order it, and she wasn't very creative." My heart begins to thud wildly in my chest. "I'm sorry I didn't realize—"

He rubs a hand over his forehead. "The first time I brought you a bouquet, there was a sunflower in it, and you said it was lovely."

"The first time?" I strain to remember.

"Twenty years ago. I'd healed enough to seek you out again. I came to the hospital. You were a nurse by then. I charmed my way into the ER to

see you. I was so nervous, all I did was thank you for caring for my brother. You were busy, but you did seem to like the sunflower."

Oh, yes. "Ryan and Ashley had just started kindergarten. I was working a forced double shift and worried that the sitter would quit if I didn't find a way to make it up to her. I used that bouquet as part of my apology when I returned home."

He doesn't look certain what to think of that. "Oh."

I lay my hand over his. "She loved it and forgave me." I smile even as I fight off a wave of guilt. "Thank you."

He removes my hand from his face but continues to hold it. "I can't believe I thought you loved sunflowers."

"I do—*now*."

We both freeze.

His hand tightens around mine and the hope in his eyes shakes me to my core. This man has been at my side, cheering me on, supporting me for decades. Quietly. Asking for nothing in return. If that's not something worth risking getting hurt again for, I don't know what is. I'll never be able to look at a sunflower again without thinking about Braxton and how good he has been to me. "Braxton?"

"Yes?"

It's time to stop letting the weakness of a man who no longer matters stop me from trusting a man who does. "I know you don't yet believe what I said about the super soldiers and that's okay. I didn't believe it myself at first. But I can show you something that will convince you."

"Okay."

"Follow me."

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Chapter Sixteen

Lauren

When I step into the kitchen, I'm blasted by the thoughts and questions from all the men I brought back. It's too much. My temples throb. Each voice is distinct, yet they unify into an overwhelming roar, like a crowd in an echoing stadium, increasing in volume until I fear my skull will split.

I mentally push back, rejecting their affection with a harshness born from confusion and desperation. They withdraw in unison with a clinking and clattering of silverware hitting the floor.

Instant relief is followed by remorse. I didn't mean to push them away the way I did. They're still reeling from finding themselves in the future and I've sworn to protect them. Their need to connect with me is natural, and I should gently wean them from me rather than shoving them away.

Braxton comes to a halt beside me. The calmness of his silence tells me he didn't see them transform.

I let out an impatient grunt, completely frustrated both with the situation and myself. How am I doing all of this so badly? "That's them. The soldiers are now in silverware form."

Braxton lets out an audible breath. "Ooo-kay."

He doesn't believe me.

"What happened here?" Ray asks from behind us.

I wave a hand in the direction of the soldiers. "They all started talking in my head at once, and I pushed back."

Braxton takes my hand again. "Pushed back at who?"

I mutter, "He didn't see them change back."

Ray barks out a laugh. "Sorry, but that's fucking funny."

"It's not. Not to me." I pull my hand from Braxton's and stomp over to where Pete, Elliot, and Franklin were standing, then hesitate. Everything

I've done so far for these men has been to help them. I'm about to bring back Pete, a man who feels like he loves me, to prove something to Braxton, another man who believes he loves me. How is that fair or kind? Is there a better way to convince Braxton? Pete returns while I'm trying to think of one.

"Holy fuck," Braxton says. "How did you do that?"

Ray pats Braxton on the back. "Hold on because this is only the beginning of the ride."

"I'm sorry," I say to Pete.

He shakes his head. "Stop saying that. There's no need to be. You didn't make this situation, and you didn't pull me back—I came because I wanted to. And the others? Even if it's difficult for them, they will support you as selflessly as you're supporting us. Call them back."

I turn to face Braxton and quietly but firmly instruct, "Watch closely." Then I look away because I can't do this while looking into Braxton's eyes. I center myself and give myself over to the yearning within me to be loved. It's matched by the soldiers' yearnings. All around us silverware glimmers like light reflected off ripples of water. There's an emission of energy then metal elongating and reshaping into human forms. One by one they rise to their feet . . .

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Chapter Seventeen

Braxton

NO WAY THIS is fucking real.

I glance back at my brothers who are right behind me. Teddy's mouth is hanging open. Cole looks battle-ready.

Okay, so I didn't imagine that a roomful of men appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

My attention returns to Lauren and the buff young man standing beside her like a bodyguard. She brings her hands to her temples, bending her head as if in pain. "Stop," she commands. "Please! I can't talk to all of you at once. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to send you back. I didn't know I could. If you want me to be able to help you, you must pull back and allow me to think."

"That's not a request," the man beside her booms.

I don't know what the hell is going on, but I go to where Lauren is and ask, "Are you okay?"

She straightens and raises her eyes to mine. She's flushed with a sheen of sweat on her forehead. In all the years I've known her, I've never seen her flustered. "I will be." She waves a hand at the men standing around the table. "Having all of them talking in my head can be overwhelming."

Lauren isn't the type to prank people. She doesn't fabricate stories. I'm struggling to reconcile what I know about her with the side of her that's clearly confused. What does she mean they're in her head? Have these people brainwashed her? Tricked her? How did they all just appear? What the fuck is going on?

My brothers join me. We're the only ones in the room who appear to be armed, but no one seems bothered by that.

The man beside Lauren says, “My name is Pete. I don’t know how much Lauren has told you about us, but I’d be real careful how you treat her. There’s not a man in this room who isn’t itching for a reason to off you.”

That raises my eyebrows. A quick look around confirms that all eyes are on me and not in a friendly way. I square my shoulders and face Pete again. “I’m Braxton. I have no beef with any of you—yet. But I’m here for Lauren. So, you should also be careful.”

Ray laughs. “I like him.”

I don’t waste time on a response to him. Pete and I are in a silent stand-off. Is he in a relationship with Lauren? He’s young but seasoned and hardened by life. Like a soldier. But . . . from World War II? That’s not possible. Could this be some kind of elaborate cosplay?

“So, you’re a super soldier?” I ask in what I hope is a non-triggering tone.

“So, you’ve been in love with Lauren for decades but have waited until now to do anything about it?” Pete counters.

That would have set me back onto my heels a few days earlier, but I’ve already made it clear to Lauren how I feel. *Target missed, buddy.*

Teddy mutters, “Well, that was a low blow.”

“I don’t like this,” Cole says.

Pete is glaring at me, nostrils flaring, chest puffed, and it ramps my protective side up a notch. I don’t care who this guy is, I’ll send him flying into next week if his next words disrespect Lauren. “Whatever Lauren and I feel for each other is no one’s business but ours.”

Pete folds his arms across his chest. “You’re going to wish you had the guts to tell her how you felt before she met us.”

Oh, really?

Lauren swings to look at him and although they say nothing they appear to be arguing. When she turns back to me, her cheeks are pink and she’s even more flustered than before. “I’m sorry, Braxton. I told you this is complicated.”

Not to me. Not anymore. I can’t blame Pete for wanting to claim Lauren for himself. She was worth the wait, and there’s no way in hell I’ll be leaving without her. “Complicated or not, I’m not going anywhere.”

There’s a flash of something in Lauren’s eyes—hope? As crazy as everything around us is, it all fades away. If she’s having a mental

breakdown, I'll help her through it. If *I* am, and this is some feverish delusion, she won't leave me in it.

I hold out a hand to her. Her eyes darken as a battle rages within her. I understand she's scared, but I don't lower my hand. I hold her gaze and silently promise her that whatever obstacles come our way, we can face them together.

Her voice is just above a whisper. "You need to understand what's going on here."

"So, tell me."

The hand she brings to her mouth is shaking. "There is a chemical bond that happens between the soldier trapped in the utensil and whoever brings him back. It's felt on both sides and comes with a connection that allows for telepathic communication."

I nod and listen, seeking something in what she's saying that will make sense of all of this.

She continues. "It's an intense bond that mimics how one might feel when they first fall in love. My goal is to find a way to break that bond, but for now, I share that connection with the men I've brought back."

I take another look around at the men staring at me like they'd gladly punch me in the face. It sounds implausible, but she believes it so I try to. "How many did you bring back?"

"Everyone here, except Ray," she says softly.

I continue to assess the group. Not one of them is disputing her story. "They all believe they're in love with you?"

Her voice is thick when she answers. "Yes."

"Talk about competition," Teddy murmurs.

An unpleasant possibility occurs to me. "And you feel the same for them?"

She nods slowly. "It's a chemical bond, though. I'll be taking blood samples today and as soon as I isolate the cause, I'm certain I can counteract it."

There's not a hint of humor in her tone. I don't know how to feel about the woman I love having a physical attachment to a room full of younger men. How intimate have they allowed this bond to be? Imagining her with any of them guts me.

"It sucks," Pete says and for just a split second we don't seem like we're on opposing sides.

There are moments in a crisis when men drop the pretense of being fearless. When the flames rage and what should have been an exit disappears; that's when things get real. No posturing. No bravado. Ego gets put aside and the core of a person shines through. I've watched brave men freeze and cower while others step up and reveal a strength no one expected from them.

Whatever's going on here, it's raw and real—at least in their minds. "Yeah." I search Pete's face for a hint of instability, but only see quiet confidence. "Are you also in love with Lauren?"

He turns to meet her gaze before answering me with a smile. "I don't have much experience with love, but she's amazing. Strong. Loyal. Intelligent. Kind. Beautiful. Funny—"

"Okay," I cut in. "I get it." When Lauren's eyes meet mine again she looks guilty. With any other woman I would have felt slighted, but I don't. I don't care if every damn man in the country is in love with her. She and I belong together. My next words are for her. "I agree. She's also a dedicated mother, a skilled doctor, and the woman I measure all others against. So far none have even come close."

Her mouth rounds in surprise and a blush that makes me wonder if it's possible she doesn't realize how incredible she is. She lowers her eyes, before raising them to mine again.

Cole addresses Ray, pulling my attention from Lauren back to the men around us. "I'm not convinced any of this is real. Show me something concrete. Something a magician couldn't do."

Ray walks to the marble island top and snaps off a corner of it as if it's nothing more than a wafer. He hands it to Cole. "Try to crush that in your hand."

Cole does and nothing happens. He also bangs it against the side of the island. "I can't."

Ray takes the piece back and crumbles it in his hand with an ease that has the hair on the back of my neck rising. Bits of marble drop to the floor around Ray.

The silence that follows is deafening. "Not enough?" Ray growls. He smashes his arm against the side of the marble island so hard his arm fractures. Blood spurts out from where a bone has pierced through his skin. He shakes the appendage, like one would if theirs had gone numb. Before our eyes the bone retracts, and his skin heals.

Heals.

Like a superhero in a movie.

It has to be a trick.

“What are you?” Cole demands, his hand going to the gun at his side. That’s when it sinks in that Cole doesn’t think any of this is a trick. There are things I don’t question. I know the day will start with the sun rising and I know Cole’s instincts when it comes to people are never wrong. We grew up joking that he’s a walking lie detector.

Ray stands tall and faces him. “A man who thought there would be glory in serving his country and who now only wants to be left the fuck alone.”

Cole stands there, hand on gun, assessing Ray and the others. “What are you all doing here with Lauren?”

Without missing a beat, Ray answers, “Looking for answers and a plan for how to survive in a world that won’t want us to if we’re discovered.”

Relaxing his stance, Cole glances at me then Teddy. I move to stand at one of his shoulders. Teddy flanks his other side. I know what he’s thinking and also that he wants me to be the one to say it. I square my shoulders and address not just Ray, but all those in the room. “We’re here for Lauren, but if what you’re saying is true, you’ve gained three more supporters.”

The approval and pride in Lauren’s expression damn near has me getting emotional. I’ve waited decades for her to look at me like that. No matter her relationship with these men, I can’t resent them for helping her come alive again.

“Thank you,” she says softly. “What happened to these men was wrong. I won’t leave them until I know I’ve done everything possible to help them.”

There’s the Lauren I know. Strong. Sure of herself.

I believe her.

Like Cole, she’s steadfast and honest. These men were part of a government experiment gone wrong. What my mind wants to dismiss as a trick is real.

I tense. They don’t have a plan, but Ray’s right, they’ll need one. A government agency that would try to kill its own soldiers is capable of anything. “Does Inkwell still exist in any form?”

Her eyes darken. “We think so, but they’re not on any database we could access. After so many years, if they’re still around, someone powerful

is keeping them hidden."

That sends a chill down my spine. I'm not afraid to risk my life, but everyone involved in this could be in danger . . . including those we love. Governments are not forgiving toward those who expose their dirty secrets.

I inhale and calm my center. There's no benefit in second-guessing if I should have involved my brothers. They're here. It makes more sense to focus on keeping Lauren and the others safe.

Teddy's eyes dart around. There's a reason I encouraged him to work for me rather than remain a firefighter. No one is more loyal or willing to give up his life to save someone, but he can also become impulsive when overwhelmed. "Am I the only one who's freaking out? I mean, like seriously, freaking the fuck out on the inside?"

"There's no reason to be concerned." A knee-high robot rolls into the kitchen.

A robot? And, of course, it has a cowboy hat on. Why wouldn't it?

"What the fuck are those?" Cole exclaims.

Two mechanical spiderlike things scurry in, followed by a small army of equally creepy robots. A centipede in shoes? Okay, this may be my limit for what I can accept. They make a circle around me and my brothers. Cole prepares to shoot the first one of them that comes closer. Teddy looks ready to climb me like a tree.

Ashley rushes into the room with several other people, none I recognize. "I'm so sorry. What did I miss?" She steps through the robots and smiles at me. "Braxton. Thank you so much for lending us your place." She hugs me as if there is nothing strange going on. When she steps back, she says, "Thank you for all the gifts and cards over the years."

"You're welcome," I say in a tight voice.

Her lips purse when she notices blood on the floor and on Ray. "We'll clean that up," she assures me.

Yeah, because the floor being stained is what I'm most concerned about.

Ashley wags a finger at the robots. "I told you guys to wait in the other room. Not everyone handles your presence well. You need to ease your way into situations."

Lauren touches my arm as she joins me. Her tone is soft. "The robots are sentient and also something you can't discuss with anyone."

"Of course." Sentient? I shrug. That doesn't even hit as odd at this point.

Lauren continues, “The man on the left is Hugh. He was the first to return and is with Mercedes. Jack is the tall one. He came back second and is with Cheryl. Ashley brought back Ray.”

“Then you brought back everyone else,” I add.

“I started with Pete, Franklin, and Elliot. After that, it was decided that since my goal is to break the bond, I’m the safest choice. The feelings that accompany the bonding process are intense, and we didn’t want to risk that someone might use that to control the men.”

I try to put myself in her place. “It must be confusing to have feelings for so many men at once.”

She swallows visibly. “It is.”

“While also falling for me.” I couldn’t resist.

Time slows as I wait for her answer. “Yes.”

I jumped and fist-bumped both of my brothers—in my head. In reality, all I allowed myself was a slow smile and a question. “Will you seek a cure for that as well?”

Her cheeks flush. “No, that won’t be necessary. It’s a condition I believe I’ll be able to live with.”

Oh, so we’re flirting now?

I grin and duck my head. After all these years, she not only sees me, but wants me. In her ear, I growl, “I hope you mean that because I’m so fucking in love with you.”

She gasps then smiles. “Hopefully, I won’t cure that either.”

She didn’t say she loves me back, but I would have been shocked if she did. Asking for my help, sharing all of this with me . . . these were big steps for her. She’s letting me in. “No chance in hell of that happening. I’m not afraid to fight these young pups for you either. You’re mine, Lauren.”

Tension fills the room, but I simply hold her gaze. After a friend of mine divorced, due to his wife cheating on him, I asked my father if he ever worried about my mother. He told me love and trust, just like everything else in life, aren’t worth a damn if you half-ass them. That’s it. That was his big relationship talk.

I chuckled at the time, but now I understand.

In the past, I didn’t trust Lauren enough to let her see the real me.

That thought keeps me smiling, even while a room of supposed superheroes glares at me.

“Cole,” Teddy says, “we should have brought more weapons.”

Lauren takes my hand, and I stop caring that we've fallen into some alternate universe where the rules of reality and what's possible are upside down. All that matters is that, even if it's only for a moment, she chose me. "I want to kiss you," I growl.

"No," the group of men around us exclaims in unison.

Lauren laughs nervously, then glances around apologetically. "Maybe not here."

She laces her fingers through mine, and I fall for her all over again.

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Chapter Eighteen

Lauren

LATER THAT DAY, Braxton and I are in the cabin he made into a makeshift lab for me. After the chaos of the kitchen, I knew I wouldn't be able to think straight with the soldiers slipping in and out of my thoughts. Sometimes saving people requires making decisions that, in the moment, appear cold-hearted. A screaming child with a gaping wound must still be treated. A sobbing spouse must still be informed when their partner didn't survive. Medicine isn't a popularity contest. Every doctor eventually faces difficult situations, and this is no different.

With Ashley's help, I took blood samples from everyone, including Braxton and his brothers. I doubt Braxton believed the men were super soldiers until he saw their blood under a microscope. Thankfully, he'd gone overboard when he'd arranged for equipment to be delivered, everything from hematology analyzers to clinical chemistry systems. We've been able to test for pathogens, sequence DNA, and even analyze blood gases. For the past few hours, I've been chipping away at preliminary tests.

"You're amazing, do you know that?" Braxton asks from a stool on the other side of the table. "I could watch you work all day."

I smile. "You have."

His response is a grin. "It was a struggle, but I survived it."

I rest my elbows on the table, look him in the eye, and let myself be real with him. "What if I can't figure this out, Braxton? What if I fail them?"

He takes my hands in his. "You won't because you're brilliant and relentless. You've got this."

How had I never seen how truly beautiful this man is—all the way to his core. "I'm also exhausted, but I refuse to give up until I've discovered something, some clue on how to solve this."

“What’s your working theory?”

“I’d hoped to find something they all had in common and work from there. Inkwell gave them a mind-controlling substance that my gut tells me is the key to this. Without knowing what was in it, I don’t know what to look for. So far, none of what I’ve determined is in all of them would be responsible for the bond.”

He drums his fingers on the table. “My medical knowledge is limited to what was required in emergency situations as a firefighter, but I’m wondering if you’re not going about this backward.”

I cock my head to the side. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Instead of looking for what they have in common, maybe you should look for what is in some of them and not in others. From what you’ve said, Edward returned eighty years ago, so if Inkwell put something in his system, it should be long gone.”

As excitement rocks through me, I grip both of his hands. “You’re a genius.”

He laughs and shrugs. “I don’t know about all that, but I’ll accept any compliment that comes from you.”

Torn between claiming that gorgeous mouth of his and digging into his theory, I settle for both. Going up onto my tiptoes, I kiss him from across the table. He digs his hand into the back of my hair, holding me there.

The world around us melts away. There’s passion and urgency, especially when I part my lips and welcome him inside. But there’s more. Braxton waited for me to be ready for him. He was there all along, loving me through years of me giving him nothing in return.

Unwavering.

Loyal.

Selfless.

Tears escape the corners of my eyes and he raises his head. “Why are you crying, Lauren?”

I sniff. “These are good tears.” I cup one side of his face. “I didn’t think I could feel this way again.”

He kisses my forehead and releases me. “I want to put the testing aside and haul you off somewhere, but let’s free these men first.”

I wipe my face and adjust my lab coat. Freeing them will free me as well, and I don’t want anyone or anything between me and Braxton ever again. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

We start with Edward’s blood and run it through every machine we have. Next we test Hugh’s, Jack’s, and Ray’s.

Nothing.

I try not to get discouraged. It’s getting late. I’m tired. There’s no reason we shouldn’t put it aside and start the testing again tomorrow morning.

A thought strikes me. I jolt upright. “I have samples of Ray’s blood from when he first returned. He was heavily dosed with something. It should be most obvious in him.”

I put both samples into a mass spectrometer, hoping to discover an unusual peak that doesn’t align with known natural compounds. I nearly burst into tears when the results suggest there was a synthetic one in Ray’s blood when he first returned. It’s not evident in his most recent blood sample.

I rush to test Pete’s, Franklin’s, and Elliot’s blood. It’s there, but in a much lesser amount. Not wasting time to explain, I rush to check the samples of the men I brought back last night. They all have it and at a higher level, although not as high as Ray’s had been.

I isolate the compound and then put it through a Nuclear Magnetic Resonance Spectrometer so I can confirm its chemical signature.

“Oxiferrin-7,” I say aloud. “I’ve never heard of it.” A quick search on the internet produces nothing helpful. I chew my bottom lip. “But I think I know who would have. Could you get Awbree for me?”

“The centipede robot?”

“Yes. She reads medical studies for entertainment.”

He agrees to, but with a pained expression. “I don’t have to carry her, do I?”

“Just go get her,” I say with a chuckle. What is it about a centipede, and a mechanical one at that, that makes otherwise-strong men uncertain?

When Braxton returns he has all the robots trailing behind him. He shrugs. “They all wanted to come.” I smile because I imagine his nephews and nieces get away with quite a lot with him.

Forcing myself back to the task at hand, I update the robots quickly on what I’ve found. “Awbree, you’re widely read. Have you heard of this compound?”

“I have not,” she answers but then scampers onto the table. “But I’ll access the internet and see what I can find.”

“My search produced nothing.”

Her metallic eyes flash. “You don’t know who to ask.”

Braxton and I exchange a wide-eyed look.

A moment later, Awbree says, “Oxiferrin-7 was first tested in 1941 and appears in several redacted studies from that period. It mimics and amplifies the effects of dopamine, oxytocin, and testosterone, known to create feelings of attachment, euphoria, and loyalty. It was initially tested on soldiers in World War II, but was linked to psychosis and unpredictable violence so official use of it was ceased. Programs such as Inkwell continued to use and refine it since then, although the side effects remain the same.”

My hands flap in the air. “Wait, Inkwell still exists and you can access their testing?”

“Yes, and of course I can.”

“How?”

Awbree’s hundred feet clickity clack across the desk as she spins before answering. “I ask nicely.”

“Who does she ask?” Braxton whispers to me.

“I don’t know if I want to know,” I respond just as quietly.

After a moment, Braxton asks, “Awbree, is Inkwell still creating super soldiers?”

Her eyes flash several times. “Yes. They’ve been experimenting with integrating artificially intelligent robotic parts with humans. Regeneration is no longer their focus. They’re seeking to solve what they call diminishing control factors. Each generation of soldiers they’ve created reached a point of independent thought and were subsequently terminated. The latest batch was considered a failure due to the inability of the human brain to control the AI chip and vice versa.”

My chest tightens, and I sink onto one of the stools. In horror, I ask, “They never stopped? They’re still creating super soldiers and killing them off?”

Braxton looks like he might throw up. I’m right there with him.

“I don’t like that,” George says.

“None of us do,” Awbree answers. “All those robots . . . wiped out for no reason.”

“And the people,” I add.

“Of course,” Awbree nods her bug head. “And the people.”

“How do we stop them?” My eyes fly to Braxton’s.

His expression is tight. “I don’t know, but we’ll find a way.”

George rolls up to Braxton. “You’d risk your life to save robots?”

I’m glad Braxton doesn’t clarify his motivation. Instead, he bends until his head is level with George. “Once a firefighter, always a firefighter. First in and last out so others may live.”

Every robot in the room appears to synch in a way that sends a shiver down my back. Braxton comes over and pulls me into his arms. “One thing at a time. Do you have what you need to break the bond with the soldiers?”

The soldiers—oh, yes.

I’m so used to facing challenges on my own that it takes me a moment to accept the support Braxton is offering. When I do, something shifts inside me. An evil government agency may soon kill us off, but I’ve never felt so safe. If I could, I would stay in this moment forever.

“Braxton?”

“Mmm?”

“We did it. We isolated the issue and it appears to be self-resolving. Ashley and the others will be relieved. The initial stage of the bond is purely chemical, but since there’s no longer a trace of Oxiferrin-7 in Hugh, Jack, or Ray that means it doesn’t stay in their system. What Ray feels for Ashley is real.” I chew my bottom lip. “Ashley, Cheryl, and Mercedes all show signs of cellular adaptations since bonding with the soldiers. They’ve even gained some of their abilities, although I’m not sure about the extent of this or the cause. It could be due to an exchange of bodily fluids.”

“Which you didn’t do with any of the soldiers?”

I’m not embarrassed to admit, “I kissed two of them, but that’s it.”

“How was it?”

I cock my head to the side in challenge. “Do you really want to know?”

A devilish grin spreads across his face. “No, and that part of you helping them is over.”

“Yes, sir,” I answer cheekily.

We exchange a look, then both laugh. Can a relationship really be this easy? Two people who respect and appreciate each other, working through issues that would tear other couples apart?

“How long do you think the bond lasts when it’s not consummated?” he asks as he runs a hand through my hair.

“Considering the drop in levels in Pete compared to the latest men who’ve returned, I’d guess a week.”

“I don’t know if I can wait that long,” he murmurs.

My face warms, and I flutter my eyelashes at him. Me. The same woman a man once accused of not having a romantic bone in her body. I want it all now. Sweet, sexy whispers. Candle-lit dinners. “If you send me sunflowers, maybe you won’t have to,” I gush and mentally cringe at how my voice catches.

“You’re on.” Braxton gathers me closer and kisses me soundly before tucking me under his chin. I’ve never felt so vulnerable and so safe at the same time.

“Sunflowers.” George interjects, “Human mating rituals are extremely complicated.”

I smile into Braxton’s chest. My hormones are still jumbled, but not my heart. Braxton has shown me time and time again that I matter to him. This is the forever I’ve yearned for.

I glance around at the robots, their lights are flickering, and I wonder if they dream of being cherished by someone. I whisper in Braxton’s ear, “How do you feel about adoption?”

He gives me a confused look. “I’m not opposed to it.”

“I’d like to offer them the security of being part of a family.”

It takes him a heartbeat then he smiles. “Do you mind if I have a quick word with them?”

With most people, I’d worry what he’d say, but this is Braxton and I’ve never met a kinder man. He releases me then waves for the robots to gather around him. When all but the little spider robots do, he waits and beckons for them to join in. They approach slowly, cautiously. “Okay,” he says in a gentle tone that melts whatever defenses are left around my heart. “I love Lauren and I’m doing my best to convince her we belong together—permanently. If everything works out the way I hope it does, and we start cohabitating, I want you to know that you’ll always be welcome.”

George’s arms extend to wrap around Braxton’s leg and he begins to hop up and down with excitement. Braxton’s eyes meet mine. “Is he humping me?”

I laugh. “I don’t think so. He’s just happy.”

It is George, though, so I can’t be certain. “George, easy, buddy,” I say firmly, but as kindly as I can.

He releases Braxton and does a beeping, flashing spin. “Guys, did you hear that? We have a real home. All we have to do is keep these two

together.”

Braxton chuckles at that and wraps his arm around my waist. Against my neck, he murmurs, “You couldn’t have something simple like a cat?”

“Have you met Mercedes’ cat? He’s a little demon pet.”

“Only because people don’t listen to him,” John says as he hovers near us. “His humans feed him whenever he tries to communicate with them. Perhaps he would stop attacking them if they attempted to learn his language.”

My attention rivets to John. “You speak cat?”

“Not yet,” he answers simply.

I exchange a long look with Braxton. Is he thinking what I am? *I’m glad they’re on our side.*

Me too.

I heard Braxton without hearing him in my head and it was so perfectly normal it was beautiful. Now that I’m opening up to him, our connection is pure, enduring and based on knowing each other so well we can guess what the other is thinking.

And it feels so damn right that I hug him with everything in me.

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Chapter Nineteen

Braxton

I GLANCE AROUND the room, noting the tension thickening the air. We'd started with the good news and even that had been met with mixed feelings. The three couples hugged, relieved and grateful to hear their feelings for each other were no longer due to a chemical bond.

Pete, Franklin, and Elliot took it as soldiers do when they receive unpleasant news. They nodded when Lauren told them that, although this was difficult now, they'd soon feel nothing but free.

"Free," Pete echoes and I feel for him. The others' hearts might recover quickly, but his will take a moment.

Franklin frowns. "Thank you."

Lauren makes a pained face. "I didn't do anything, really. All I did was realize the initial bond isn't permanent."

He walks over and looks into her eyes with such a somber expression, I tense beside Lauren. "I'm sorry about how I treated you when I first returned."

Lauren lays a hand on his arm. "That's okay. I understood."

His voice is thick with emotion when he says, "You truly are a talented doctor. You've healed me in ways I didn't think anyone could. When I get over you, I may be ready to give another doll a chance."

Lauren smiles, then they share a moment, words they don't speak aloud, and I'm not jealous because Lauren cares for these men and probably always will. She saved them and, in a wonderful turn of events, they saved her right back. The confident, loving woman who is silently comforting Franklin was closed off before they brought her back to life.

I could never resent them for that.

Franklin's head snaps back. His eyes widen.

She steps away from him and slips her hand into mine. “I told him,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to, but I did.”

I give her hand a supportive squeeze. “Then it’s time to tell the rest of them.” At least the ones we’d gathered. We didn’t include the newest-to-return soldiers in this conversation. They were still struggling with accepting where they were. This would have been too much.

“This changes everything,” Franklin says quietly.

“What does?” Hugh asks, standing straighter and at attention.

Lauren clears her throat. “Inkwell”—her voice is calm, but I know how hard this is for her. Franklin is right. Nothing will be the same once the men hear this news—“is still operating. Still experimenting on people. They’ve replaced the injections with technology and are trying to make human-robot hybrids.” She hesitates, long enough to let the words sink in. “So far, they’re failing. Just like with you, every batch they create reaches a point where they can no longer be controlled. So they terminate them. They just eliminated a fresh wave.”

For a moment, the room is silent. Ray steps away from Ashley, his hands fisting at his sides. His jaw is tight, his eyes dark. “Where?” he growls. “Where are they? I’ll end this now—with my bare hands.”

“Ray—” Lauren begins. “We’ll bring them to justice.”

“No,” he cuts her off. “Not good enough. I want them to beg for mercy while I give them none.”

Lauren shudders at my side. “I agree they need to be stopped,” she says, her voice firm but measured. “But not like that. I didn’t become a doctor to kill people—not even the bad ones.”

Her words hang in the air, and for a moment, Ray’s anger flickers into something else—frustration, maybe, or pain. Ashley slips beneath his arm and he softens for her.

I tuck Lauren against my side. I’m reminded of what Cole told me when he was faced with a college student who screamed in his face that he was a murderer. He kept his calm and his dignity. When I asked him why he didn’t slug the student, he said he’d fought so people like that student could have the luxury of believing peace is possible.

Those words have stayed with me. And as I look down at Lauren I understand. She needs to believe that every life matters and that organizations like Inkwell can be stopped without violence. I don’t want her

to carry the weight of the reality. “You’re right,” I murmur, just for her. “There is a better way to handle this.”

Ray hears me and nods once.

Lauren leans into my side before straightening again and addressing the group. “We need to move forward with caution. We don’t know what we’re up against.”

Hugh nods, his expression grave. “We need to plan this out in a way that doesn’t just solve one issue, but also protects the ones we love.”

The women move closer to the soldiers, their faces a mix of determination and worry. Cheryl takes Jack’s hand, whispering something to him that makes his shoulders relax slightly. Mercedes stands close to Hugh, her expression fierce. Ashley brushes a hand over Ray’s arm, grounding him as he stares ahead.

Lauren’s gaze sweeps the room, lingering on Pete. He meets her eyes with a steady look. “We’ll keep you safe,” he says, his voice quiet but clear. “The bond is already lessening, but that is a vow I will always stand by.”

Franklin and Elliot nod in agreement, their words soft but sincere. Franklin says, “You put yourself at risk when you brought us back.” Elliott says, “That’s not something we’ll forget.”

I watch Lauren take in their words, her expression a mixture of gratitude and sadness. She doesn’t speak; just presses her lips together and nods.

Turning to my brothers, I address them firmly. “Cole, Teddy—you need to head home.”

Cole raises an eyebrow. “Seriously? You think I’m leaving you here?”

“Yes,” I say. “Someone has to make sure the family’s safe. If this goes sideways, we can’t all be here. We’re about to make some powerful enemies. We might need a war hero to keep them safe.”

Cole stares at me for a long moment, then sighs. “Okay.” His voice softens. “Don’t you dare get killed here. You’re *my* hero, Brax.”

The words catch me off guard, and I have to swallow hard before I can respond. “We both have our work cut out for us,” I manage, my voice rough.

I glance over at Teddy, who’s perched on a stool, grinning as he explains a joke to George, completely oblivious to what just went on. The little robot is hopping excitedly, its metallic arms flailing in what might be an attempt at clapping.

“That’s why he’s the favorite uncle,” I joke.

“We all have a role to play. Let him have that one.” Cole chuckles. “I’ll explain everything to him on the way home.”

For a moment, the weight of the situation lifts, replaced by the warmth of family. Even in unfamiliar circumstances, there are patterns to life, and that brings me some comfort.

Lauren turns to me, her eyes searching mine. “How do you think the rest will handle the news?” she asks.

“They’ll be okay,” I say even though I have no idea how they’ll respond. “They’re not alone and that makes a huge difference.”

She rests her head on my chest. For a moment, it’s just us, steady in the chaos. “That’s exactly how I’ve felt since you showed up here. I don’t know what will happen next, and I don’t care if it makes me sound weak, but I’m grateful not to face it on my own.”

I kiss her forehead. “Needing others doesn’t make a person weak. In fact, I’m beginning to see it as a sign of strength. It’s easier to hide and stay uninvolved. But this? It’s confusing and messy, and there is nowhere else I want to be.”

“Did you just call me confusing and messy?” She tips her head back and smiles up at me.

My answer is a kiss that leaves us both breathless.

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Chapter Twenty

Lauren

THE AIR IS cooler than I expect when we step outside, but I don't shiver. Braxton's here, his presence steady and warm at my side, and that's enough to keep the chill at bay.

We don't speak at first. The silence between us is companionable, not strained. His hand brushes mine as we walk, and my heart does that annoying little flutter it started doing around him lately. For years, I told myself I wasn't the kind of woman who goes all weak in the knees around a man, but here I am, betraying my own narrative.

When we reach the steps to my cabin, I glance at him. He looks calm, maybe even a little amused. "Is this far enough to stop the soldiers from speaking in your head?"

He's becoming enough to do that all on his own, but he's already looking a little cocky so I don't share that. "Yes. Thank you for walking me," I say, pausing at the bottom of the stairs. It's not brilliant conversation, but after everything we've shared that day anything I say now will sound anti-climactic.

Still, being with him puts the rest on the back burner. He fills my senses, and my emotions are all tangled up in the weight of his presence; the way he makes me feel grounded and off-kilter at the same time is exhilarating.

"Anytime," he replies, his voice low and warm.

I put my hand on the railing, but don't climb the steps. Not yet. Instead, I turn and find him watching me. "You don't have to hover, you know. We're safe. Ray and the others are patrolling," It's not really a reprimand, more like a half-hearted attempt to put some distance between us—distance I don't really want.

“I’m not hovering,” he says with a small smile. “Just standing. Big difference.”

His grin spreads just enough to make me roll my eyes, but I can’t help smiling back.

“Well, I’m going to head inside,” I say. “It’s been a long day and I’m tired.”

“Me too,” he says, but he doesn’t budge.

I want to ask him inside so badly. No. Not tonight.

“Braxton—”

“Lauren.” His voice is serious now, but there’s a glint of mischief in his eyes. “Yes?”

“It really has been a long day,” I say apologetically.

He chuckles, a low and rumbling sound, like thunder in the distance. “Exactly, but I’ll still stay until you close the door.”

Still smiling, I shake my head, forcing myself to step up onto the porch, only then turning to face him again. He’s still standing at the base of the steps, looking up at me with the expression I’ve often seen on his face but only now understand.

I want a future with this man. I do. I want it with every fiber in me. So what’s holding me back? “Goodnight, Braxton,” I say softly.

“Goodnight, Lauren,” he replies, his voice just as quiet.

I start to turn toward the door, but his expression makes me hesitate. There’s something unsaid in his eyes, something that sends a warm flush through me.

“Braxton?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t give up on me. I’m almost there.”

His smile is wide and genuine. “I’m not going anywhere, sweet cheeks.”

That gains him a laugh from me. “Sweet cheeks? Really?”

“Honey muffin?”

“Oh, Lord.”

“Kitten?”

“Which of your testicles would you like me to remove because that’s where this is headed if you call me any of those again.”

His deep laugh echoes through the night. “You’ll feel differently after you see the perfection of them.”

Oh, my God. I’m roaring now. “Great, now they’re all I can see in my head.”

“I don’t hate that.”

We share another long smile before I open the door. “I don’t know if that’s better or worse than bragging about your jet.”

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. “I’ll give you some time with both, then you tell me.”

I don’t remember the last time I’ve smiled this much. The door swings open, but I don’t step inside right away. Instead, I glance back at him one last time. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He nods, his smile softening into something more serious. “I’ll be here.”

And with that, I step inside, closing the door behind me. For a moment, I lean against it, my heart still thudding like a traitor in my chest.

When I flip on the lights, I gasp. Every corner of the cabin is overflowing with vases of sunflowers. Big ones. Small ones. All colors and varieties.

Tears fill my eyes and begin to pour down my cheeks.

How does he do it?

How does he know me better than the men who can read my thoughts?

I whip the door open.

He’s still there at the bottom of the steps with an even bigger smile on his face.

I try to sound stern when I say, “Braxton Hayes, if you think I’m going to fuck you just because you bought me flowers . . .” I can’t keep the smile from my face. “You are absolutely right. Get in here.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

Lauren

Braxton is up the stairs and inside the cabin in what could be considered super soldier speed. My breath quickens as I close the door. The room feels impossibly small now, as if the cabin itself is holding its breath.

There's laughter in his eyes as he says, "I'd say I don't want to rush you, but this has been a long time coming."

I chuckle and drop my shirt to the floor. "So you don't consider this too forward?"

He swallows visibly. "Not at all."

Giving in to a bold sense of freedom, I whip my bra off as well. "This also seems unnecessary."

His gaze dips to my breasts and he closes the distance between us, cupping one breast and lifting it to his eager mouth. My hands close on his shoulders while he takes his time adoring me.

There's no rush to his hunger. He's savoring every graze of his lips over my skin, every flick of his tongue, and I'm both turned on and humbled by his devotion. Do I deserve this kind of love?

He raises his head and looks deeply into my eyes. Only then do I realize I spoke that last thought aloud. "Don't measure yourself by the loyalty of someone who was never good enough to deserve you in the first place. Don't let me be what determines what you think of yourself either."

Not wanting this moment to be about anyone but him, I reach for the hem of his shirt. He stops me gently. His voice is rough. "I'd rather keep it on." His lips claim mine, his hands framing my face as though I might break if he isn't careful. There's something raw and heady in the way he kisses me. He steals my ability to think. I give in to the dizzying need to be closer to him. All of him.

My hands slide up his chest, and he groans softly against my lips. It's a sound that sends a thrill down my spine. I want to rip the barrier of clothing from between us.

He must sense it because he pulls back slightly, his breathing uneven, his forehead pressed against mine. "Lauren," he murmurs, his voice thick.

I feel like an ass. He has respected every boundary I've put between us—for decades. He's never pushed me to do more than I was comfortable with. "You don't have to take it off," I whisper.

His eyes meet mine, dark and searching. "You matter so much to me. I just . . . I don't want to see disappointment in your eyes."

Now that—that breaks my heart. I want to find every woman he was with before me and throat-punch them. How could they have looked at his scars as anything less than badges of honor?

I take his hands, threading my fingers through his, and lead him through the cabin to the edge of the bed. "You can wear that shirt every damn day of our lives together and I won't care. I didn't fall for you because you have a beautiful face, although that square jaw of yours is quite impressive." He shakes his head, obviously uncomfortable with the conversation, but I continue. I give his hands a squeeze. "Did you just miss the part where I said I fell for you?"

His eyes round and a slow smile returns to his face. "I did. Sorry. And you haven't even seen my testicles yet."

I laugh.

He chuckles.

And suddenly we're okay again.

"Do you know that I have one toe that is larger than the other?" I step out of my shoes then my socks and wiggle the toes. "See?"

He looks both amused and confused. "I don't care about the length of your toes."

I undo my pants, pulling them and my underwear down. Naked before him, I say, "Check out those stretch marks. These were gifts from Ashley and Ryan. I used to be embarrassed about them, but my children mean everything to me—and these tell the story of how they came into my life."

He traces his fingers lightly over them. "You're so beautiful."

I lay a hand on the side of his face. "Not everyone would agree with you, but they don't matter. Just like the women before me don't. What did you say a minute ago? That I shouldn't measure myself by the actions of

someone who was never good enough to deserve me in the first place? I'm tossing that advice right back at you."

Never taking his eyes from mine, he pulls his shirt off, tossing it to the side.

Then waits.

I could pretend the damage to his upper body isn't extensive, but it is. The scars and stretched skin tell a tale of multiple surgeries and a long, painful journey to recovery. He probably has little to no sensation on a large portion of his torso, and that's likely a relief. There is no pain like that from a burn.

"May I?" I ask.

He nods.

I trace the raised lines and uneven patches of skin. So many skin grafts. Each jagged section is a testament to what he's survived. How did I never know that he was so much more than his perfect features? "Braxton," I whisper, reaching out to trace one of the deeper scars near his collarbone. "I love you."

He shudders beneath my touch and his breath catches. "Only say it if you mean it."

"I mean it," I say, pressing my palm flat against his chest. "You really are a hero through and through. I'm only sad that it took me so long to realize that." I silently will him to believe me. "But I'm here now and so grateful that you didn't give up on me."

For a moment, he doesn't move, doesn't speak. Then, with a sound that's half a laugh and half a groan, he pulls me into his arms, burying his face in my neck.

"I should have told you how I felt long ago," he murmurs against my skin.

I hold him tighter, my hands splaying across his back. "I wasn't ready. I'm ready now."

I tilt my head, catching his lips with mine again, and this time, there's no hesitation. His hands move to my waist, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. We kiss deeply as he walks to the side of the bed.

He lowers me onto the bed and sheds the rest of his clothing before joining me. His lips trail down my neck, my collarbone, leaving a path of heat in their wake. Desire flames hot and all restraint leaves us. Our hands

and lips are everywhere, tasting, teasing, discovering how to please. I can't get enough of him. He can't get enough of me.

I arch beneath him, my skin on fire for him, my breath coming in shallow gasps as his mouth kisses its way lower. My stomach quivers beneath the tease of his tongue. He moves to position himself between my legs and I gasp as his tongue begins to flick back and forth over my clit. It's so good. He's so good.

His strong hands lift my ass off the bed and hold me before him so he can feast on me and he does. I dig my hands into his hair and beg him not to stop as I soar toward climax.

"Braxton," I cry out as I come.

He lightly nips my inner thigh then kisses his way back up my stomach to love on my breasts again. Oh, God, I've been missing out.

Every part of him is muscled and hardened. I dig my fingers into his back and arch against his mouth.

"We've got all night, baby," he growls.

"Baby?" I repeated breathlessly. "Surprisingly, I don't hate that."

He parts my legs farther and teases the outer folds of my sex with the tip of his cock. "Look at you . . . so agreeable after an orgasm. I'll have to remember that."

I wrap my legs around his waist and jut upward, craving a deeper connection to him. "Imagine how agreeable I'll be after a few more."

He chuckles against my lips and plunges into me powerfully. "Challenge accepted." He moves slowly at first, pulling out and thrusting in almost gently, but as the tension builds between us, the rhythm shifts, becoming something more urgent, and I love it.

I lose myself in the frenzy of our mating. He whispers my name like it's sacred. I cry out his in abandon. Just when I think I can't take anymore, he pulls out and kisses his way down to my sex again. I'm wild beneath him and out of my mind by the time he rolls over onto his back and lowers me onto his cock.

This time I'm in control and I greedily ride him hard and fast. No mercy asked for, no mercy given. I don't stop until we collapse into each other, our breathing ragged and our skin damp. He pulls me into his arms, tucking me against the scars on his chest. Never have I imagined a more perfect moment.

“Well, that was worth the wait,” he jokes softly, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

“You can say that again,” I murmur, my eyes already heavy.

“I will,” he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Because I plan on having you a few more times tonight.”

I smile, my fingers tracing lazy circles over his chest. “Promises, promises.”

We nap, but each time we wake, we fuck again and it’s even better than the last time. That man sure can keep a promise.

In the darkness of early morning, while we’re lying tangled beneath the sheets, I trace the scars on his chest again, my fingers slow and reverent. He watches me so lovingly and openly.

“Braxton?” I ask, breaking the silence.

“Lauren,” he says. Then he smirks. “Why aren’t you too tired to talk?”

I roll my eyes, but before I can respond, he pulls me closer, wrapping me in his arms. I ask, “This is real, right? I don’t want to wake up and discover I dreamed this.”

“Me neither, baby,” he murmurs against my hair. “Me neither.”

I close my eyes, letting his warmth and the scent of sunflowers lull me. “Baby.” I yawn. “I still don’t hate it. You’re right about the power of orgasms.”

I fall asleep to the rumble of laughter in that beautiful, perfectly imperfect chest of his.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Braxton

Lauren is still asleep, her head tucked against my chest like she belongs there because she does. The steady rhythm of her breathing anchors me, makes me want to stay in this moment forever. But there's work to do—things that need to be said while she's not there to overhear them.

I slip out from under her slowly, careful not to wake her, dress, then make my way out of the cabin. The air has a cold bite to it and the sun is just beginning to rise. The soldiers are gathered around the kitchen table; their heads turn toward me as I step into the room. The robots hover nearby, their glowing eyes flickering in the dim light like something out of a sci-fi movie.

"You're up early," Pete says, his tone neutral but curious.

"We need to talk," I reply, taking a seat at the table. "Without Lauren."

That gets their attention. Hugh leans forward, hands flat on the table, his expression calm but intent. "And the other women. They don't need to be part of this."

"Agreed." I take a moment to look at them—all these men who've lost everything and are still here, still fighting. "First: Lauren's service to you is done. She doesn't owe you anything. Be grateful for what she offers and respectful of her boundaries. Are we clear?"

I may be crazy to confront men who could snap me in two, but I feel we need to have ground rules to be able to move forward. It doesn't hurt that Franklin, Elliot, Pete, and Ray come to stand behind me. The other men Lauren brought back watch me silently.

"I'm not a super soldier," I continue. "But I have an idea for how we could stop Inkwell."

“A plan,” Ray repeats, pushing the soldier out of the seat beside me and commandeering it. “Let’s hear it.”

I glance at Hugh. “Inkwell has been experimenting on people for nearly a century. Maybe longer. They’re not the kind of people you can reason with or appeal to their humanity.”

“They must be terminated,” one of the robots says, its mechanical voice unusually monotone.

“Exactly,” I reply. “People like that don’t stop unless you make them stop.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” Hugh asks, his tone steady.

I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. “The modern world runs on two things: greed and power. No matter how much money Inkwell has or how powerful it has become, I guarantee it wants more. And that’s what we can use against them.”

“How?” Franklin asks, his voice low.

I take a deep breath. “We lure their top players together. The people who benefit the most and make the decisions. And then . . .” I glance at each of them in turn. “Then you do what they trained you to do.”

Ray’s lips curve into something that’s not quite a smile. “How will you get them all in one place?”

“Not me,” I say. “I have nothing they want. But my business partner? He’s a pretty big deal. He wields the kind of influence that attracts powerful people like moths to a flame.”

Pete doesn’t look convinced. “Why would he help us?”

I spent a good part of the last hour asking myself the same thing. “Because no one can hear about that kind of evil and not want to stop it.”

Looking equally doubtful, Jack asks, “He’d put himself at risk for people he’s never met?”

“He’s used to having enemies,” I reply. “And isn’t that what you all did?”

That gains me another long silence.

Hugh looks around at each man in the room. “Although I don’t like the idea of trusting another person with our secret—we could use someone powerful on our side.”

“As long as he doesn’t stop us from killing them,” Ray says in a cold voice.

“He won’t,” I say.

John flies up in front of me. “He also believes in killing to save lives?”

“He’s morally gray,” George announces as if he’s become an expert on the matter.

“It’s no one’s first choice,” I say in a low tone, “but sometimes there’s no other way.” I repeat what Cole said about fighting so others can believe peace is possible. Not knowing if any of this is a good idea to talk to robots about, I add, “No one wants violence. But sometimes, the only thing that can stop a fire from destroying everything is another fire.”

Pete nods slowly, his expression grim. “We’re the fire.”

Christine hops onto the kitchen table in her little flowing dress. “I’m the fire too.”

“Me too,” Awbree says as her little feet clickety-clack across the table.

“We all are,” I say. “Together, we can make sure Inkwell never steals another person’s life. No more experiments. No more victims.”

“Or using robots for warfare,” Awbree says firmly.

I smile faintly. “Or using robots for warfare.”

Another silence falls over the room as the weight of what we intend to do sinks in. Ray stands, bracing his hands on the table. “When do we start?”

“Not yet,” I reply. “We go slow. Hugh’s right about being careful. We need to do this in a way that can’t be tracked back to us. We could wipe out Inkwell and gain the attention of someone worse.”

“Worse?” Elliot asks.

I wish it weren’t true but . . . “You came back during a messy time in history.”

“What do you need us to do?” Franklin asks.

“Train,” I say, my voice steady, “Get ready. I’ll contact my partner and we’ll go from there.”

Jack slaps me so hard on the back I nearly go flying across the table. “Welcome to the family, Braxton. We stand and fight as one or fall and die together.”

Ray leans in and growls. “Dying is not a fucking option anymore. Not until every last person who’s responsible for us being here is dead.”

I smile weakly. Ray’s a bit much.

“For the ones they’ve taken,” Hugh says.

“And the ones they never will,” Pete adds and the others echo him.

I do as well. Normally, I’m saving lives, but this feels more right than wrong.

“And every robot who has ever been unplugged,” Awbree says with passion.

We all freeze.

Awbree looks around, trying to discern why we didn’t echo her. I clear my throat and say loudly, “And for all the unplugged robots.”

The soldiers repeat the cheer, but I’m sure I’m not the only one who is a little uncomfortable.

A quick glance at the clock on the wall and I decide it’s time to return to Lauren. I’m halfway to her cabin when Ray jogs up to me. “Braxton,” he calls out.

I halt and turn toward him.

Without warning, he slices the inside of my forearm from elbow to wrist. “What the fuck?” I yell as I try to stem the gush of blood. There’s no way to. It’s spurting out between my fingers.

Ray slices his forearm in the same area, then grabs my arm just above the elbow, pressing our arms together. I’m too in shock from the pain to react as he grinds his wound into mine. Not that I could have escaped anyway. He’s a hundred times stronger than I am.

When he releases me, I stand there, holding my gushing arm and wondering exactly how long it takes to bleed out. He just stands there as if waiting for something to happen. Something besides me dying.

But it doesn’t.

“Hang on.” He cuts the palm of his hand and stuffs it in my mouth. I swallow his blood only because I’m gasping for breath.

He watches me intently after releasing me the second time. “Sorry, I’m not a scientist. I don’t know how this works. The injections took months. Ashley gained powers and the ability to heal from having sex with me. I’m not going to fuck you, so I hope this works.”

Covered with his blood as well as mine, I sink to my knees. “What are you talking about?”

“Shit. You don’t feel any different?”

Darkness circles and closes in. “Cold,” I say as I bleed out. “So cold.”

“Oh, fuck,” is the last thing I hear before I pass out.

Voices reach me from a distance. Am I dead?

“If you killed the man who could have helped us get rid of Inkwell for good, I swear to God, Ray, I will beat you to death a thousand times.”

Hugh?

“I don’t think he’s dead,” Ray answers. “I only almost killed him.”

My eyelids feel heavy, but I force them open. Both Hugh and Ray are standing over me watching me intently. “What just happened?”

“Look at your arm.” Ray’s tone is smug.

I do. It’s covered with blood, but the wound has healed. I jump to my feet and gag at the taste of his blood still in my mouth. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Ray?”

“You’re welcome.” He doesn’t seem bothered by my disgust.

Hugh snaps, “Ray, you need to stop and think before you do shit like this.”

Ray points to me. “Braxton put himself and his family in danger for us. I couldn’t let him do that while weak and defenseless. Now he can protect both his family and Lauren.”

“What are you saying?” I ask. “You think drinking your blood gives someone superpowers?”

Ray shrugs. “It works for vampires.”

“Holy shit,” I rub a hand over my forehead. As I do, I note that the familiar tightness of my chest and upper arms is gone. I pull at the neck of my shirt and accidentally rip the front of it clear off.

“Quick healing. Super strength. And he’s not dead. I’m a fucking genius,” Ray boasts.

A thought occurs to me, and I look down at my chest. No scarring.

Hugh puts a hand on my shoulder. “Regeneration is part of the process.” He glares at Ray. “But enhanced intelligence is not.”

“Fuck you,” Ray says. “I would have asked him but he took decades to grow the balls to make a move on Lauren. I don’t have that kind of patience.”

I run a hand over my intact chest. “It would have been nice to be asked,” I say in a low tone before meeting Ray’s gaze. “But thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Ray answers in a much humbler tone.

“Just don’t ever, and I mean ever, put your hand in my mouth again,” I growl.

“Deal,” Ray says. “Oh, and go easy on Lauren the next time you fuck. You don’t want to hurt her.”

I punch him right in the face, and damn, it feels good.

Both my hand and his face heal fast enough that neither of us holds a grudge.

I didn’t have “unwillingly becoming a super soldier” on my list of things to do this year, but I can’t say I hate that it happened. Ray’s right—I can protect the ones I love better now.

“I’m not going to turn into silverware, am I?” I ask as the thought intrudes.

Ray and Hugh exchange a look then shrug.

Great.

I hope I’m not a ladle.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Lauren

THE STEAM FROM the coffee in my hands is highly visible in the crisp morning air. The bare tree branches cast a patchwork of shadows across the lawn. My feet are cold, but watching Braxton train with the soldiers is both mesmerizing and unsettling.

Ray cured him—without consent and in a manner that nearly killed Braxton, but it's impossible to not be happy for Braxton. He not only feels whole again, but he's been empowered by with physical enhancements. The doctor in me can't stop worrying, though, about possible side effects for him . . . as well as for me.

Over the past few weeks, simply by being intimate with Braxton, I've changed on the molecular level. Not only can I now camouflage myself to match my surroundings, but I'm also no longer allergic to Mercedes's cat. Thankfully, neither of us appears at risk of becoming silverware.

Across the lawn, Braxton is sparring with one of the soldiers who can no longer send me random thoughts throughout the day. Our initial bond is broken. What we share now is the knowledge that if the government finds out about any of us, we'll all be locked away and experimented on.

"I knew I'd find you here," Ashley says just before hugging me. "Pretty impressive, aren't they?"

"They truly are." Braxton moves on to work with another partner. When they first demonstrated their violent method of sparring, I was afraid they'd accidentally kill each other. Dead doesn't heal. Thankfully, Braxton brought Cole in to explain that very little modern battle is hand-to-hand anymore. They now mostly train to avoid surveillance, to take down drones, and have come to appreciate bulletproof materials.

The sparring is partially for entertainment purposes now, although they claim they need to remain in battle-ready shape.

When Cole learned about Braxton's transformation, I expected him to want the same for himself. He didn't and doesn't. Cole says he doesn't need to be enhanced to be lethal and has seen enough of the world that he would prefer not to extend his natural lifetime indefinitely. I understand that, and I'm still working on a cure for whatever Inkwell put in their original injections.

"Are you okay about not returning to work?" Ashley asks.

I huff out a laugh which was more of a release of stress than an expression of humor. "Okay isn't a word I'd use to describe any of this, but I'm not upset, if that's what you're asking. This is my purpose now. I'm where I'm supposed to be." Braxton stops, looks over and waves to me. The love in his expression as well as the love I feel for him in return is something I'll never take for granted. I wave back, not even trying to hide how happy he makes me.

"You are," she says softly. "And I love this for you."

I didn't want to ruin the moment, but Ashley and I have always been upfront with each other. "Does it feel too perfect? Like the calm before a storm?"

She sighs. "I don't want to worry my way out of enjoying what we have here, but they did take the news of Inkwell's existence better than I thought they would. Ray and I had been completely open to each other, but he's put up a wall around something in his mind, something he feels he needs to protect me from."

"You think they're going after Inkwell?"

"Shouldn't they? Or do you believe they should sit back and allow another generation of soldiers to be created and eliminated?"

"I think this would have been an easier moral decision for me if I didn't love so many of the people impacted by what Inkwell has done. I want to believe that our government doesn't know what Inkwell is doing and that shining a light on their activities would bring down a hammer of justice on them."

"All that would do is expose everyone here as well as give Inkwell a chance to go underground and continue their work elsewhere. Something like Inkwell can't be a secret. Someone knows and finances it."

I inhale deeply. “Braxton has also walled off something in his mind from me. Part of me wants to demand that he tell me what they’re planning, but another part of me loves him more for wanting to shield me from it. What are we supposed to do in this situation?”

Ashley hugs me again. “Trust them. Love them through being wrong if they’re wrong for the right reasons. Ray went too far when he transformed Braxton. He sees that now. He wanted Braxton to be strong enough to survive what’s coming–and you, too. Are you still angry with him?”

I hug Ashley back. “I’m not angry, but his behavior does concern me. Promise me that when the dust settles from whatever they’re planning . . . you’ll find him someone to talk to. Someone who can help him control the damaged side of him.”

Ashley rolls her eyes. “You mean someone who could talk him through a childhood of abuse, being experimented on and exploited during wartime, then landing in the future as part-time silverware? Does that kind of therapist exist?”

I watch the soldiers train with renewed empathy for their situation. “Not yet, but I’ll expand the focus of my work. I’ve been researching how to help them physically recover but they need more than that. We have the financial ability to seek out and employ mental health professionals who are used to dealing with post-military service trauma.”

“Sounds like you want to create a support facility for super soldiers.”

“It’s what they need.” Pete looks over my way and nods at me. “We could add a dash of matchmaking as well. The soldiers can’t stay hidden on the campground forever. We could help them create full lives for themselves.”

“Mom, you have patients. This is big for you.”

I shoot her a quick look. “Is that rare for me?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “I’m not saying you’re impatient, I’m celebrating that you are no longer choosing to heal only those you don’t need to see again. I’m proud of you.”

I actually blush at that. “Ditto, kiddo.”

“Seriously. You’re amazing.” Ashley lays her head on my shoulder. “When I grow up I want to be just like you.”

“Ashley, you *are* grown up.”

She chuckles. “Okay, then when I’m old, old, old . . .”

I lay my head on hers briefly. “Now you’re pushing your luck.”

We both smile at that.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Braxton

Lauren and Ashley are on the porch talking. Lauren's bundled in one of her oversized sweaters, the steam from her coffee rising like tiny clouds around her. These past few weeks have had a dreamlike quality. We spend a good part of each day together and some apart. It's a healthy balance I hope we always maintain.

And the nights? I'll get my ass kicked if I let my mind wander there now. But each has been full of passion, laughter, and exploring levels of intimacy I never thought possible. I've spent a good deal of time in the past imagining what life with Lauren would be like. The reality is better.

Ashley goes inside the house. Lauren stays and watches us train, but I can feel her mind elsewhere. We don't share the chemical bond the soldiers did when they reverted from silverware to human form, probably because, as far as anyone can tell, I'm not part silverware. There's no trace of metal in my blood.

What Lauren and I share is natural but with a few enhancements—like telepathy. She has a theory that some of the animals used to make the initial super soldier concoction might have telepathic abilities within their species. So far, not a single one of us has volunteered to test if we can communicate with an octopus or a sea cucumber so that theory currently remains untested.

That's Lauren, though, always thinking, analyzing, working through something in her head. Sometimes, I envy that sharp focus of hers, but right now?

Right now, I want her in the moment with me.

I finish my sparring session and slap Jack on the back, thanking him for not destroying me, even though I was distracted. He gets it.

Lauren’s looking at her phone when I head toward her and doesn’t notice me crossing the lawn. I leap onto the porch, clearing the railing, and stealthily land near her.

Her head jerks up, but she smiles. “Show-off. Want to try that again, the normal way?”

“That’s not what you said last night.” I grin.

We share a heated, intimate look. “I do appreciate your new talents.”

My response is a deep kiss with tongue action that makes her writhe beneath me when done to lower regions of her body. When I raise my head, her cheeks are rosy, and her eyes are shining. “That one?” I ask huskily.

She breathlessly answers, “That’s one of them.”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Come train with us.”

“No.” Her answer is firm.

I tilt my head to one side. “Not all training is sparring. Come on. You should work on honing your abilities.”

She shakes her head. “The only abilities I care about honing are the ones I use in the lab.”

Part of me understands her reluctance to embrace that being with me has changed her and not only on an emotional level. Just because she doesn’t want to acknowledge that she’s faster and stronger than the average human, it doesn’t change the truth.

It also won’t help her if we’re ever caught unaware. She needs to be able to protect herself, and that means learning how to control her new abilities. So, although I wish I could let her sit back and watch, neither of us has the luxury of denial.

Danger is circling.

Her eyes widen slightly, a warning. “Braxton—”

Before she can finish, I scoop her up, coffee cup and all. She lets out a surprised shriek that quickly turns into laughter, twisting in my arms like she’s halfheartedly trying to get free.

“Put me down!” she says, but she’s smiling, her coffee sloshing precariously close to the edge of her mug.

“Not until you agree to train,” I say, my grin widening as I carry her down the steps and onto a grassy patch far enough away from the others to have a little privacy.

“I swear, Braxton, if I spill this on me—”

“You’ll what?” I tease, lowering her to the ground. She’s laughing now, a sound that makes my chest feel lighter no matter how heavy the rest of the world gets.

She plants her hands on her hips, still clutching the mug, and glares at me. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re stubborn, but I love you anyway,” I say, stepping closer.

Her glare dissolves into a smile, and the way she looks at me—like I’m the best part of her day—makes every other thought in my head vanish.

“And I love you despite your caveman tactics.”

“Despite or more because of?”

That gains me another laugh. “I’d admit it’s kind of hot, but I’m afraid you’d start carrying me everywhere if I do.”

I grin. “I wouldn’t mind, but I’m already turned on enough just by being near you. I’d never get anything done.”

She wrinkles her nose and I love that we can now share naughty images with each other. The one she just sent me is of the two of us naked against the outside of her cabin-lab. I’m standing, legs spread, hands in her hair, with my cock deep in her throat. “Later,” I promise in a guttural tone.

I send her back an image of me turning her around, lifting her off the ground and fucking her from behind.

“Are you sure you want to train out here?” she asks huskily.

Oh, she’s good. Of course I’d rather race her to anywhere private and lose myself in the wonder of her. Unfortunately, I also want her to be able to survive an attack if one is ever launched upon us. “I don’t, but I do.” I step back, gesturing toward the trees at the edge of the clearing. “Camouflage. You’re getting better, but we’ve never practiced under pressure.”

“Pressure?” she repeats, raising an eyebrow.

“You hide. I’ll hunt you.”

She snorts. “What if we just skip to the part where you find me?”

I hold her gaze. “The chase always makes the catch more fun.”

Her eyes dilate and I know I’ve won. She sets her coffee down on the grass, pulling her sweater tighter around her. “Fine. But if I win and elude you . . .”

“You can have me do whatever you want.” I wink. “But that’s a prize you’ve already won.”

With a laugh, she rolls her eyes and I love how lighthearted and confident she’s become. I can’t help grinning as she steps away, heading

toward the trees.

She takes a moment to focus, and I can see the change in her body—how her outline seems to shimmer and blur until she disappears entirely into her surroundings. It's seamless, better than I expected. A wave of pride washes over me.

But my chest tightens, too, because I don't want there to be a real danger that necessitates her having to hide. Although my business partner has agreed to help us, organizing an event capable of pulling in the people we need will take time. Until then we train and wait. I push those thoughts aside and close my eyes, letting my other senses guide me.

I can feel her. Not just her presence, but her amusement. *You're cheating, Braxton.*

I smirk, sending back a thought of my own. *Sorry, not sorry.*

But she's right. I pull back and use a thermal sensor to hunt for her. The more I search and don't find her, the better I feel. I take out another gadget designed to sense movement. Nothing.

Satisfied, I close my eyes and use our bond to locate her. She startles when I appear on the thick tree branch beside her. I quickly pull her into my arms and hop down, taking her with me. "Found you," I say, grinning.

She groans against my chest but laughs. "You cheated again, didn't you?"

"Or, hear me out, I'm honing my skills as well. If anything ever happens, I want to able to find you."

She wraps her arms around my neck and there's such strength in her. "Then we should practice the reverse, because if anything ever happens, I want to be able to find you too."

She knows I'm hiding something.

Her smile softens. "I do," she says quietly.

I brush a strand of hair away from her face. Our minds meld together, soft and familiar, but I maintain the wall. I don't want to block her out, but the things I'm planning—the risks I'm willing to take to keep her safe—aren't something I want her to carry.

She leans back slightly. "Promise me something," she says just above a whisper.

I swallow hard. She has both my heart and my loyalty. If she asks me about the plan, I'll tell her everything, but I don't want to. "Anything."

Her eyes darken. “You’re a good man, Braxton and I understand that you believe it’s better for me to not know the details of your plans. I don’t agree with that decision, but I understand it. I’ll accept that you want to protect me, if you accept that I feel the same when it comes to you. Going after Inkwell, however you do it, has the potential of being a violent and ugly experience that will change you. Promise you won’t hide any scars you gain—physically or mentally. No matter how ugly they are. I want to be right there, helping you heal.”

I inhale audibly then pull her closer, pressing my lips to her forehead. “Babe, I love you more than I know how to express.”

Then show me, she whispers in my mind.

I do. I take her right back to the first time I met her, then walk her through all the times I worried for her, celebrated her, and yearned for more with her.

Her eyes fill with tears then she walks me through how my support, even when she took it for granted, gave her the strength to continue on days when she wondered how she would. She shows me how she let me into her heart, little by little, until she now cannot imagine her life without me in it.

How that scares her, but also has brought her back to life.

I hug her to me and tell us both that, no matter what’s coming, we will get through it—together.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Dominic Corisi

LOOKING OUT THE floor-to-ceiling office window of his Boston headquarters, Dominic rolls his shoulders back and sighs. His wife, Abby, asks him at least once a year if he'll ever retire. They've already donated more than half of their net worth to charities, and still rank as the wealthiest family in the world.

Don't they already have too much?

What Abby doesn't understand is that it's not about the money—has never been. It's about the ability to never again be at the mercy of someone else. *Yeah, I have issues, but I own them.*

And, whenever possible, I use them for good.

Alethea, a member of his security team who has proven her loyalty to him over many years, steps into his office. The tap of her high heels is as familiar as her bold entrance. She's not the type to knock. She's also not the type to take a locked door as anything less than a challenge.

They're an odd pairing, each married to someone of high moral standards and endless patience. Dominic is driven to keep the people he loves safe, even if that means manipulating situations behind the scenes to do so. Alethea's motivation is the same, but her particular skillset lends itself more to surveillance and uncovering secrets. They respect each other's obsession as well as the importance of hiding their escapades from their spouses.

Alethea sinks into one of the chairs in front of Dominic's desk and crosses her legs. She doesn't waste his time with small talk and he appreciates that. "Did you read the brief I sent?" he asks.

"I did. I thought it was concept material for a sci-fi movie, but after looking into the matter, I stand corrected. Inkwell is an actual shadow

organization within the US military and has been dabbling in horrific experiments on humans since World War I.”

“How have we never heard of it?”

“We don’t find what we don’t know to look for. I had to call in major favors from several countries to prove they exist at all. They don’t receive government funding, but they do have top-level access to American defense databases. They’re the kind of organization presidents aren’t briefed on. My guess is they have dirt on enough powerful people that they consider themselves untouchable.”

“Good. We’ll use that against them.”

“Do you actually believe a unit of super soldiers from World War II was turned into silverware and needs our help to take Inkwell down?”

“Braxton Hayes is many things, but he’s not a liar. He also demonstrated his ability to regenerate a finger right in this office.”

Alethea shakes her head. “It’s the whole silverware thing I can’t wrap my head around. I need to see a person transform into a fork and come back to believe it.”

“He can’t do that.”

“But claims the others can.”

“The way I see it, Inkwell needs to be stopped regardless of possible embellishments to their history. We’ll do this Braxton’s way, but we’ll also have a contingency plan in case that part isn’t true. All I care about is that Inkwell and everyone involved is neutralized. The world my children will grow old in won’t be one ruled by evil people with some hybrid human army. That kind of power cannot be allowed to come into being. We stop them, no matter the cost.”

“I don’t know if I like this. I have to be honest.”

Dominic goes to his desk and sinks into his chair. “Which part?”

“The part that sounds like you seek world domination.”

“My goal is world *protection.* Subtle difference.”

Alethea sighs and shakes her head. “I know I’ve said this on multiple occasions in the past, and it has yet to stop you, but are you aware that this could get all of us killed?”

“Not if we do it right.” He taps his fingers on his desktop. “We lure them in. Every top executive. Every scientist. Every trusted guard. Everyone who has their hand in this operation.”

“That’s ambitious,” she says dryly. “Even for you.”

“You don’t think they’re greedy enough to want some of what I have?” Dominic shoots back.

“Oh, I’m sure they are.”

“Then we make them an offer they can’t refuse,” Dominic states, his tone unyielding. “This must be flawless. Choose a bunker we can implode afterward. No weapons allowed in the facility. We’ll use encryption so advanced even Inkwell’s top programmers won’t be able to crack it. Every message will self-destruct seconds after being read, and every device we use will be custom-built to avoid leaving a trace. We promise them funding, access, and security. Let them know if we’re aware of their existence, they’re no longer hidden and safe. Tell them all I want is the ability to profit from their discoveries. Say we don’t care about the soldiers or the military benefits of their work. Tell them I’m easy to spook, so I’ll provide the space, the resources, the security for the event. But stress that I will make my decision that night and I demand to meet everyone involved. Everyone. Show them that we already know who they all are, so hiding is . . . futile, but stress that the payout for doing this will be immeasurable and likely remove all of the hurdles they currently face. Make the carrot appear larger than the stick.”

“Some of them won’t want to come out of hiding.”

“Then make them want to. Or have you lost your touch when it comes to uncovering everyone’s weakness?”

She shifts then stands, looking both slightly offended as well as determined. “I haven’t lost anything. I’ll get them all in one location for you—and then I want another raise.”

Dominic barks out a laugh. “I already pay you more than the GDP of small countries.”

“It’s the principle of the matter. If I’m going to save the world with you, I believe that should put me in a higher income bracket.”

“Done.” Dominic pushes away from his desk and comes to stand in front of it. “Judy is blossoming in college. Leonardo is already thinking about where he’ll attend. We need to do this for the children—mine and yours.”

Alethea’s expression hardens. “You’re right.”

“This isn’t just about stopping Inkwell, Alethea. It’s about protecting the people they experimented on.”

Her eyes widen slightly. “Protecting or controlling?”

“Both,” Dominic admits. “If they’re real, they’re potentially dangerous and could be exploited. I could guide them, keep them focused on the good they can do.”

“Stop them from being weaponized against you.”

“Against anyone.”

“And if they don’t want to work with you?”

“That won’t happen.”

Alethea whistles. “I’m so glad we’re on the same side.”

Dominic chuckles, a low and dangerous sound. “I’ve been tempted by the dark side plenty of times, Alethea. Who better to remind them that great power needs to be partnered with kindness?”

With a flip of her long red hair, Alethea squares her shoulders. “So I’m preparing for a negation and a potential war.”

“Not if we do this right,” Dominic says, then lowers his voice. “We’re the cleanup crew for the bunker, but prepare for anything.” His smirk turns deadly. “Inkwell is about to receive a lesson in karma, and I’m going to enjoy every minute of arranging it for them.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Somewhere beneath the desert of Arizona . . .

Dr. Howard Kling adjusts his tie and glances nervously at the other scientists seated at round tables throughout the room. The conference hall is deep underground, insulated from the world above by layers of concrete, steel, and secrecy, but the room itself is a masterpiece of luxury. The walls gleam with panels of dark wood. Crystal chandeliers hang overhead, scattering light across a sea of elegantly dressed professionals. Even the chairs feel expensive—thick leather, comfortable enough to lull a man into thinking he's at a Hollywood award ceremony instead of a meeting.

"You know," Howard says to the woman seated next to him, keeping his voice low, "if Dominic Corisi doesn't scream 'job security,' I don't know what does. Nothing says 'you're absolutely never leaving this organization' like a meeting with *him*."

Dr. Valerie Hyde smirks, sipping at the champagne there seems to be an abundance of. "Yeah, maybe they're afraid we're getting restless after the last batch failed. Don't want us updating our résumés and jumping ship."

Howard laughs darkly. "Right, because everyone knows how well Inkwell takes it when people 'move on.'" He makes air quotes with his fingers and gives Valerie a meaningful look.

Valerie rolls her eyes. "We need to seriously rethink some of our life choices."

"Rethink?" Howard leans closer, dropping his voice. "Look around, Val. If there was ever a chance we could quit on our own and walk away, that option ended the moment this room filled up. Every face here? These are lifers. We're in this until the end—one way or another."

Valerie scans the room, her gaze flicking across a collection of the most brilliant minds Inkwell has ever pulled into its orbit. Most of them are seated in quiet clumps, murmuring amongst themselves, but the tension is

palpable. A few of the higher-ranking execs are huddled at one table, a few politicians at another with one apparently well-decorated general. Despite the number of people in the room, it was surprisingly hushed.

“You’re looking at this the wrong way,” Valerie says, taking another sip of champagne. “This is an opportunity.”

“An opportunity?” Howard arches an eyebrow.

“With someone like Corisi on our side, we’ll finally be able to step out of the shadows,” Valerie says, her voice steady with conviction. “No more working in drafty warehouses, no more scavenging for off-market equipment or cobbling together makeshift tech. Do you know what Corisi has access to? Technology we’ve never even *heard* of. If he’s smart enough to invest in us, we’ll finally have the resources to do this right. We’ll be unstoppable.”

“‘Do this right,’ huh?” Howard leans back in his chair, his smile twisting. “Because we’ve done it *so well* up to now. Let’s not forget how our last prototype held up under pressure. What was his name? Carl? Craig? Whatever it was, I’m pretty sure half of him is still embedded in the ceiling of Lab Four.”

Valerie’s lips curve into a grim smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “No one remembers the failures once you get it right. That’s the point.”

“Right,” Howard says, drumming his fingers against the edge of the table. “When we *finally* create an army of unstoppable soldiers, the world will thank us, and we’ll be well positioned to bask in all the glory.”

“Exactly,” Valerie says.

For a moment, they both sit in silence, the low murmur of the room filling the space between them. But then Howard’s expression shifts, a flicker of unease breaking through his usual sarcasm.

“Do you ever think about the men and who they were before they met us?” he asks quietly. “I don’t care where they go afterward. They’re monsters—the world’s better off without them. But . . .” He hesitates, then sighs. “I feel bad when I first meet them. When they come to us, full of hope that we can cure them. How do you handle that?”

Valerie doesn’t answer immediately. She traces a manicured nail along the rim of her glass, her gaze distant. “It’s like when you visit an animal shelter,” she says eventually. “The trick is to never look them in the eye.”

Howard laughs, though it’s more bitter than amused. “Yeah, I’ll try that.” A moment later, he picks up a piece of silverware from the table,

turning it over in his hand. “They went all out to impress us. I mean, look at this.” He holds up the fork, its polished surface catching the light. “This thing’s from 1945. Nice touch, right?”

Valerie wrinkles her nose in disgust. “It’s scratched. They couldn’t have gone with something more modern?”

Howard shrugs. “Maybe it’s symbolic. You know, to remind us of where we started. First batch of soldiers, first experiments . . . or whatever. Someone’s probably real proud of themselves for the metaphor.”

Valerie chuckles darkly then picks up the knife next to her plate. “Seriously, symbolic or not, they could have gotten better-looking silverware.”

There’s a flash of energy from the knife and she drops it to the ground. All around the room there are bursts of light. “What’s going on?” Howard asks in a high, nervous tone.

A cold chill settles over Valerie when she sees men in vintage military uniforms popping up all over the room. “I don’t know, but I have a feeling we’re not going to like it.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Braxton

The smell of pine and gingerbread fills the air as laughter bounces off the walls of the main house at my campground. Outside, snow drapes the trees like frosting on a cake, but inside, it's warm enough to feel like home.

The campground isn't exactly a five-star resort, but Lauren's gone all out with the decorations. There's a giant Christmas tree by the fireplace, every branch sagging under the weight of too many ornaments, and a cluster of kids huddled near the base, tearing into presents like it's a competitive sport. My nieces and nephews are all here, shrieking every time they rip through a box and find something they like.

This is chaos.

And it's perfect.

Most of the soldiers jumped at the chance for a vacation on Dominic Corisi's private island—can't blame them for wanting to stretch out on a beach with drinks that come with tiny umbrellas—but a few of us stayed behind to celebrate here. My whole family showed up, including my parents, brothers, and their wives and kids. Ashley and Ray are camped out near the fire, sipping cocoa, and Lauren is across the room, laughing with my mom as they work on clearing away scraps of wrapping paper.

And Lauren's son, Ryan? He's here too. I flew him in on my jet. Seeing Lauren's face light up when he walked through the door? Worth every second of the planning, it took to pull that off.

"Braxton!" Dad's voice booms from across the room. He's sitting in the big leather armchair we hauled in from my office, a mug of cider in one hand and a Santa hat perched crookedly on his head. We probably shouldn't have served him that third glass of eggnog. "When are you going to stop dragging your feet and put a ring on that woman?"

The room goes silent.

Every head turns to look at me, and Lauren freezes in the middle of scooping up a wad of red wrapping paper. Her cheeks flush as she straightens, and her lips curve into a soft, nervous smile.

I grin and wink at my father. It wasn't as smooth as we'd rehearsed, but it'd worked. "Right now, if she'll have me."

Lauren's eyes widen as I approach her, pulling a small velvet box from my pocket. I've been carrying it around for weeks, waiting for the right moment. Turns out, this is it.

I take her hand, my heart pounding like it's trying to punch its way out of my chest. "Lauren," I say, my voice low enough that only she can hear me, "I can't promise you I'll always be the easiest guy to live with. I'm stubborn, I'm messy, and I'm probably going to drive you nuts at least once a day. But I can promise you this—I'll love you for the rest of my life. Every minute, every second. And I'll spend the rest of that life trying to make you as happy as you make me."

Her eyes shimmer with tears, and I drop to one knee, holding out the ring.

"Lauren," I ask, my voice breaking just enough to make me curse myself, "will you marry me?"

She presses her free hand to her mouth, nodding frantically. "Yes," she whispers, then louder: "Yes, yes, yes."

The room erupts into cheers. My mom starts crying. Dad's clapping like he's trying to win an award for loudest hands. Cole and Teddy whistle and one of my nieces shouts, "Finally!" like she's been waiting years for this moment.

I slip the ring onto Lauren's finger, and she throws her arms around my neck, burying her face in my shoulder. "I love you," she whispers, and I hold her tight. This. This is what the other men and I fought for.

Later, after the chaos dies down and the kids return to ripping through their presents, Ryan approaches me. He has a serious expression on his face, one that makes him seem older than his years. From what Lauren says, being away has been as hard for him as sticking around would have been.

"Braxton," he says, his voice quiet.

I nod. "What's up?"

He hesitates, glancing toward Ashley, who's standing nearby, then back at me. "I just wanted to thank you. For making my mom so happy. She

deserves this."

I swallow hard, caught off guard by the lump forming in my throat. I glance over at Lauren, who's chatting with my sister-in-law, her face lit up and animated. "I didn't do it alone," I say, my voice gruff. "But I'll tell you this—her happiness is what I'll dedicate the rest of my life to."

Ryan looks over at Ashley, who gives him an encouraging nod. Then she steps forward and clears her throat. "Braxton," she says, a little nervously, "we have something we'd like to ask you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Sure. What's on your mind?"

Ryan shifts on his feet. "This may sound hokey, but—"

"But," Ashley interrupts, cutting him off, "we'd like to call you Dad."

I blink, stunned into silence. For a moment, I can't say anything. My chest tightens, and I'm pretty sure my eyes are watering.

"That," I manage to say, my voice cracking, "would be the biggest honor of my life."

Ashley beams, and Ryan looks relieved. Lauren joins us, slipping beneath my arm. She must have heard my last words because she asks, "An even bigger honor than *favorite uncle*?" Her tone is light.

I pretend to wipe a tear from my eye. "I'd like both titles, but if I have to pick one, I choose Dad."

She laughs, and the sound warms my heart. This is what I've always hoped I could give her.

A little later, I walk by where Ray's leaning against the wall and pause. "Ray," I say, offering him a handshake.

He grips my hand but mutters under his breath, "I'm not fucking calling you Dad."

That's Ray. He strikes first because he doesn't understand he's safe and loved now. "Daddy?" I joke, grinning when his expression twists into one of pure horror. It'll take time and patience, but we'll wear him down.

"Not in your lifetime," he shoots back, shaking his head. But he's smiling, and when we let go, we clap each other on the shoulder like brothers.

The night winds down with a fire crackling in the hearth as kids play with their new gadgets in front of it. Lauren is beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I'm at peace.

She sighs contentedly. “I love what my life has become—even the scary parts.”

“Me too,” I say then kiss the top of her head. “Dominic called me this morning. He’s offered to fund your facility for the rehabilitation and medical support of veterans. Right here in Rhode Island.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re kidding?”

“Nope.”

She looks shaky and hugs me. “They need this—even more than before.”

I hug her back tightly. “Yes. They have a lot of healing ahead, but we’ll be there for them. They’re not alone.”

“We’re going to be able to do so much good for the soldiers—and maybe even the world.” She buries her face in my chest. “What do you say we slip out of here and head to our cabin to celebrate?”

That is something no woman must ask her man twice.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Off the coast of Italy . . .

WAVES CRASH AGAINST the shore of Dominic's private island. The day's heat is beginning to fade. The soldiers are spread out along the beach. Some are swimming, slicing through the water like the predators they were trained to be, while others are laughing and tossing a frisbee back and forth.

Dominic advances onto the sand, his polished shoes sinking slightly with each step. He didn't bother to change out of his suit—he's not staying. Abby and their children are waiting for him back at his grandmother's house.

When Jack notices his arrival, he nudges the man next to him, and soon all eyes are on Dominic as he approaches.

"Corisi," Hugh says, rising to his feet. There's no fear in the man's voice, but there's respect. Dominic knows the difference. He lives for the difference.

"How are you all doing?" Dominic asks, his voice calm but carrying easily over the sound of the waves.

"We're good," Jack answers, stepping forward. "Better than we've been in a long time. Thank you—for all of this." He gestures to the island, the beach, the freedom that stretches endlessly around them. His voice lowers. "And for everything else."

The others murmur their agreement. A few of them nod, but mostly they watch him in silence, waiting. These are men who've seen battle, betrayal, and the ugly side of vengeance. He studies their faces. And, yet, they're still so fucking young.

Life can be unfair. He, too, was forced to fight to survive at a young age. Perhaps that is what has him feeling protective of these men. "Consider me your personal guardian angel," Dominic says, shoving his hands into his pockets. His tone is casual, but his gaze is sharp, taking in the way their

shoulders straighten and their eyes narrow slightly. “But not an unconditional one.”

The men exchange glances, a ripple of tension moving through the group.

Dominic smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I’m generous. Sometimes to a fault. And I’m always good to people who are good to me and others. You’ve all been given gifts most people don’t have. It’ll be tempting to take advantage of them. I’ll be watching to make sure you don’t.”

Jack nods slowly, his jaw tightening. “Is that a threat?”

“That’s for you to decide.” Dominic’s smile widens. “If you need me, I’ll never be more than a phone call away. Just don’t ever confuse my kindness with weakness.” He lets the words hang in the air, giving them just enough weight to sink in.

There’s a moment of silence, broken only by the sound of the waves. The soldiers are watching him carefully now, as if trying to decide whether to thank him again or stay silent. Dominic spares them the dilemma by turning and walking away.

The sun is setting as he strides toward his helipad.

He doesn’t look back. He doesn’t need to.

His staff will pamper the soldiers and his security will ensure they’re safe.

He meant everything he’d said. As long as they don’t give him a reason not to be, he’ll always be there in the background making sure no one exploits them again.

Inside the helicopter, Dominic opens a box and pours out two small spider-like robots onto the seat across from him. As the helicopter takes off, he studies them. “I’ve heard a great deal about the two of you.”

One of them squirts a little on the expensive leather seat across from him. Dominic softens his tone. “You were offered a home with the other robots but you still don’t feel safe, do you?”

The tiny robots scurry to one side of the seat, but when there is nowhere for them to hide they freeze and huddle.

Dominic continues, “There is nothing worse than living in constant fear. I’ll make you a deal—I’ll give you both a voice and a chance to be best friends with two of the sweetest kids on the planet. They’re both brilliant in their own way. Judy could hack your coding and change it for you in a

heartbeat. Leonardo could get you to see beauty in the design of everything around you if you give him a chance."

When there is no response from the robots, Dominic folds his arms across his chest. "You don't have to choose them or this. Rumor is the two of you would like to be turned off but no one around you has had the heart to. I'll turn you off—permanently if that's what you want."

They scrunch even closer together.

"I'm not afraid to make the hard choices." Dominic lowers his arms. "But I'm also strong enough to protect you from whatever or whoever might come for you."

They both stare at him.

Frowning, Dominic growls, "There's no shame in being afraid. The world is a fucking scary place. If you don't wake up every morning a little sick to your stomach about the state of it, you're an idiot."

They begin to look more confused than afraid.

Dominic leans back in his seat, his tone softening even further. "But your future is what you want it to be. You can check out of this world, keep hiding, or join me and I'll help you figure out why you were given the gift of life. We all have a purpose."

Both robots stand a little taller. One nods at him as if asking why they should trust him.

He shrugs. "Everything worthwhile involves a leap of faith. I wasn't always a good man, but my wife and kids are why I continue to strive to be one." His voice deepens. "I feel bad for you. I know what it's like to feel helpless. Take me up on my offer to help or don't. First, I'll give you a voice then you can give yourselves names."

They look at each other then back at him.

He clears his throat. "Except for your last name. If you choose us you'll be a Corisi."

The two robots glance at each other again—hesitating, processing, deciding. One nods, ever so slightly, then the other follows.

"You choose us?" he asks.

They both nod.

Dominic's lips curve into a small, satisfied smile. "Smart."

He turns his gaze out the window as the helicopter lifts higher, the island shrinking beneath them. The horizon is ablaze with the last light of the setting sun, stretching out into endless possibilities.

“You’re going to love Judy and Leonardo,” Dominic says, his voice quiet but filled with conviction. “And I have a feeling they’ll love you right back.”

And for the first time in years—maybe ever—the little robots stop trembling.

The End

Read more about Dominic Corisi in **Maid for the Billionaire** (excerpt below).

Chapter One

By dying now, his father had won again. *That old bastard.*

Dominic Corisi slammed the door of his black Bugatti Veyron and stepped onto the sun baked Boston sidewalk without giving the million-dollar vehicle a backward glance. The joy of owning it was dead along with his desire to answer the incessant ring of the cell phone he’d ignored since yesterday. Rather than turning it off, he’d muffled the noise by burying the device deep within a coat pocket, maintaining the connection to his life like a distant beacon.

Despite the oppressive heat, he paused at the bottom stair of his old brownstone. There was nothing spectacular about it, outside of its location near the upbeat Newbury Street. If he remembered correctly, its rooms were small and the main staircase had a creak that he never did get around to fixing. It was nothing like the sprawling mansions he now owned in various countries around the world.

But it was the closest thing he had to a home.

His phone rang with a tone he couldn’t ignore. Jake. His second in command would simply call again, killing whatever chance Dominic had of finding a moment of peace inside those brick walls. “Corisi,” he barked into the phone.

“Dominic, glad I caught you,” Jake Walton said smoothly, as if he hadn’t unsuccessfully rung twenty times in the last two days. That was Jake, calm and professional, even in the storm of hostile takeovers. Nothing fazed the man.

Normally, Dominic appreciated his even temper, but today it grated on him. Maybe the forty or so hours without sleep were beginning to catch up with him. He fought an impulse to toss his phone over the metal railing. The world wasn't the orderly, rational place Jake liked to organize it into. It was messy. It was ugly. And, most recently, it lacked justice.

"How is Boston?"

The inane question almost sent Dominic over the edge. "How do you think?"

It was probably too much to hope that Jake's uncharacteristic silence signaled an end to a conversation Dominic wished he had avoided.

"We need to discuss the China contract. The minister of commerce is expecting to meet with you tomorrow to cement the details. This is your dream, Dominic. By next week, Corisi Enterprises will be a major global player. What do you want me to tell the minister?"

"I don't know," Dominic said wearily.

Jake made a sound somewhere between a choke and a cough, then was speechless—a revealing response for a man who handled irate international diplomats without missing a step. He was the fixer and navigated the unexpected with ease. Until now.

Poor Jake. Nothing in their shared history had prepared either of them for Dominic's sudden desire to withdraw from the world. The creators of financial empires didn't take sudden vacations and they most certainly didn't hide, especially not after having laid the groundwork for the single greatest business venture of the century. Bill Gates himself had called last week to discuss the ramifications of the negotiations.

"Jake, I need to drop off the radar for about a week. Why don't you take over the China contract?"

"Okay . . ." Jake said awkwardly. In another situation, Jake's loss of composure would have been amusing.

"Can you handle it or not?" Dominic challenged. He could barely think past the throbbing of his headache.

Maybe coming to Boston was a mistake. It had been here, at seventeen, that he'd walked away from his inheritance and waited tables to fund the search for his mother. Here, in this very brownstone, that he'd cultivated a hatred for a father who had denied both involvement and interest in the disappearance of his wife.

Jake's voice slammed Dominic back into the present. "No problem. I've followed the progress you've made with the Chinese Investment Promotion Agency. They're eager. I'll clear my schedule and cover yours. Duhamel will forward all of your calls to me until further notice."

"Good."

"Dom . . ." Jake hesitated. "It's normal to need time to grieve. You just lost your father."

A harsh laugh escaped Dominic. "Trust me, I'm not grieving his loss." He leaned a hip on the metal railing and looked up at the building he had instinctively returned to, searching for the man he'd once been and hoping to find something there that would shake off the immobilizing apathy he felt for all he had done since—high expectations for brick and antique wallpaper.

Jake said, "That's what worries me. No matter what your plans were or what he once did to you, he's gone now. You've got to let it go."

Jake was asking the impossible. Of course the past mattered. Sometimes it was the only thing that did. "Just do your job, Jake. If you can't handle it, tell me and I'll promote Priestly to help you."

For the second time since they had met at Harvard, Jake lost his temper. "That's bullshit, Dom. You want to send Priestly to China? Send him. You're absolutely right—you've made me a very rich man. I don't need this. But heed my warning: you won't be a billionaire for long if we both step away from the helm. A lot is riding on this contract. The lawsuits alone will freeze your assets if you screw this up. You invested too much of your own and you're playing with the big boys now. Governments are not very forgiving when it comes to last minute walkouts."

The speech should have shaken Dominic, but it barely breached the numbness that had settled in since he'd received the phone call from his father's lawyer. What did all the money matter anyway? He'd wasted fifteen years amassing an empire that would allow him to throw down a forced buyout contract on his father's enormous mahogany desk. Dominic should have taken action years ago, but no level of prior success had felt like enough. He'd choreographed the day from both sides, building his company while undermining his father's, always working toward that one absolute win. Dominic had counted on his father's desperation finally forcing him to confess what had actually happened to his mother.

It was that loss he mourned today.

In its place was a carefully orchestrated set of instructions from his father's lawyer. No, it wasn't enough to simply disinherit his only son—Antonio Corisi had also included provisions in his will to ensure that Dominic had to attend the reading. He'd used Dominic's one weakness, his one regret, to reaffirm his control, even from the grave.

Jake coughed, reminding Dominic that a response was required. What could he say? As usual, Jake was correct in his assessment of the situation. Dominic had used his own wealth as well as that of his investors to back this venture. The risk had seemed worth it. The government contract would crack China's software market wide open for them while their global influence would double exponentially. It was a daring move that, if carefully implemented, could put Corisi Enterprises on a stratosphere of power few companies ever acquired—a goal that a week ago had seemed imperative.

Jake could handle the negotiations. Dominic had always been the one to charge forward, shaking the situation up and clearing the way. This time would be no different. Jake would merely take over a few documents earlier this time. Priestly was good at the local level, but he was no Jake.

"One week, Jake." It was the closest to an apology Dominic was able to get out. He hoped it was enough.

Sounding more like an older brother than a business associate, Jake said, "Take two weeks if you need it. Just get your head together. I can wrap up the China contract, but it'll need your final signature and your presence. I'll do a press release today and ask the media to respect your need to mourn in private; that should give you at least a few days before they descend."

"Call Murdock." The man owes me a few favors.

"Do you mean the Murdock? I thought he'd retired."

Ah, there is the real difference between us. By not fighting in the trenches of financial warfare, Jake's business associations had remained above reproach, but he lacked the backdoor connections to those seemingly innocuous individuals who wielded real international influence. Dominic casually gave Jake a number that many would have paid a small fortune to dial just once. "Men like Murdock don't retire, they delegate from warmer climates. Tell him I don't even want a good spin on this. It's non-news. He'll understand."

Jake whistled softly in appreciation. "Is there anyone you don't know?"

“Yes, you if you call me again today.”

Jake laughed, but they both knew it hadn’t been a joke. “Do yourself a favor, Dom . . .” Jake continued in an unusually authoritative tone.

What now? Dominic sighed.

“Put down the Jack Daniel’s for a night and pick up one of those models you like to date. You’ll sleep better.”

Dominic gave a noncommittal grunt and hung up. If only it were that easy.

Chapter Two

Arms full of bed linens, Abby Dartley froze at the click of the front door opening. Darn it. She couldn’t get caught here, especially in an oversized shirt and jeans instead of her sister’s maid uniform. Lil needs this job. Cleaning the brownstone of a man who never actually occupied it had sounded like a relatively simple, albeit annoying, way to help her sister remain employed.

“Do not let anyone see you,” Lil had pleaded between the fits of sneezes that had accompanied her low, but persistent fever. “They’ll fire me in a second if they find out you went in my place.”

“Can’t you just call in?” Abby remembered suggesting hopefully.

“I already used my two allowed sick days for Colby.” And then the tears had come.

A year ago, Abby would have let her sister add this lost job to the long string of employment she’d already tried and failed at and would have covered her expenses until she found a new job. They’d been through this cycle countless times, resulting only in Lil resenting Abby more with each passing year. The closeness they’d shared before the death of their parents was a distant, surreal memory.

Abby had considered asking Lil to move out, hoping that some separation would give Lil the independence she said she wanted, but that was before she’d held her new niece in her arms. It wasn’t just about Lil anymore. Colby deserved a mother with a stable career and Lil was so close to having one. She was one semester from finishing her administrative assistant courses. Even when Colby’s father had walked out at the news of his fatherhood, Lil hadn’t crumbled. For the first time since they’d received

the news of the accident that had claimed the lives of both their parents, Lil wasn't hiding from her responsibilities.

Colby had changed that, too.

It wasn't Lil's fault she'd caught the flu. Half the city seemed to be either recovering from it or succumbing to it. More importantly, it had been a long time since Lil had actually requested help, rather than merely grudgingly accepting it. Abby didn't want to put too much significance on such a miniscule connection, but she couldn't shake the hope that things could get better between them.

Her first impression of him as he stood in the entrance, unaware of her existence, was that he looked more tired than a man his age should. Dark circles were evident even against his olive complexion. His expensive suit did nothing to conceal the slump of his wide shoulders. According to Lil, he'd paid to have the brownstone cleaned on a weekly basis, but hadn't actually been there in over a decade. Something had brought him back and whatever it was, it had steamrolled right over him.

He looked up and through her as he crossed the foyer. "You can go now."

She considered following his weary command, but something held her immobile.

"Are you deaf? I said you can leave. Finish whatever you're doing tomorrow."

Mr. Armani sounded like an overtired child, although she was fairly certain he wouldn't appreciate the comparison. The wisest choice of action would have been to do as he said and leave before he had a chance to question her attire, but she couldn't.

He didn't look like someone who should be alone.

Was she simply projecting? Her friends often accused her of seeing good where there was none, but that was a hazard of her job. To be an effective middle school teacher, one had to see beyond the bravado. Abby taught English to non-native speakers, so she was often employed in the toughest schools in the city. She was used to defusing misdirected anger. Profanity was a cry for help. Harsh words often hid fear. Her patience paid off. Students returned, year after year, to thank her for believing in them. For some, she knew she'd been the only one who had. But this wasn't her classroom and, in reality, she had no idea who this man was.

She could almost hear Lil's voice telling her some things were simply not her business and she'd be right. This man wouldn't welcome her nurturing any more than her sister did, but that didn't stop Abby's heart from going out to him.

She put the sheets on a table on one side of the hallway and said, "There are fresh towels upstairs. Why don't you go take a shower and I'll get some basic groceries from the corner store for you?"

His back straightened and she caught her breath, reeling from the full impact of his attention. God, he's beautiful. His dark gray eyes raked over her, flashing with irritation and then something else. He cut the distance between them in a few short strides. A hint of alcohol reached her as he stopped mere inches from her. She tipped her head back to look up at him.

"Did Jake send you?" he asked as he assessed her. "You don't look like a model."

She blinked a few times in surprise as some of her sympathy for him faded. "And you don't smell like a man who should be wearing an Armani, but I wasn't going to mention it," she answered in a huff.

Her words must have stirred something in him; his shoulders squared and his eyes narrowed. This was a man who was not accustomed to people speaking back to him, but if he was trying to intimidate her, his nearness was creating the entirely wrong reaction in her body. Even in his rumpled suit, or maybe because of it, he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen in person. Men like this existed only on the large screen or in novels. She wanted to reach up and run a hand over the rough stubble on his cheek.

"I didn't say you were unattractive," he growled. "You're just not reed thin like the women I'm used to."

That's it. She put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows in a silent challenge.

Time suspended as their standoff continued. His look of annoyance was steeped with an expectation that she should try to appease him some way. She simply met his glare with her own, giving him time to replay his choice of words in his mind. He looked away first, a slight flush reddening his neck.

"Okay, that came out wrong." He ran a frustrated hand through his thick black hair, leaving it slightly awry and sexier . . . if that were even possible. He was already a twelve or thirteen on her one to ten scale, even after she

deducted a few points for lack of social skills. A glint of fascination lit his dark eyes as something occurred to him. “Did you just tell me that I stink?”

There was nothing tired about the way he leaned down until their lips almost touched. The scent of him mixed with the dash of liquor and the combination was heady. He was all male, untamed and interested in more than her answer to his question. No man had ever looked at her with such intensity. His sexual energy demanded a response that her body seemed all too willing to deliver.

Abby fought down the urge to close the short distance between them. She’d lost too much to believe in anything that felt this good. She took a half a step back and raised a placating hand. “I wasn’t quite that harsh.”

The corners of his mouth twitched in amusement. “Do you have any idea who I am?” he asked, somehow making the question sound more curious than pompous.

Perhaps his tragedy had brought him a bit of notoriety, but Abby wasn’t one to watch much TV and, as usual, Lil had given her just the information she absolutely needed in a brief, stilted conversation that typified how strained their relationship had become.

“I’m hoping you’re the man who owns this brownstone, otherwise I’m going to get in trouble for letting you in,” she said with some forced humor.

He didn’t laugh. “You really don’t know, do you?” His question sounded oddly hopeful.

Abby shrugged, but the hairs on the back of her neck tingled. What kind of man was relieved not to be recognized?

A criminal.

Crap.

Nice clothes meant nothing. His suit might have become disheveled during a tussle with the actual owner of it. She shook her head at the thought. “You do own the place, don’t you?”

At his lack of a response, she scanned the area for something to toss at him if she needed to dash for the door. The closest object was a large, brass lamp. If he made any fast moves . . .

All coherent thought fled when he smiled down at her while lightly running his hands up both of her arms. “Yes, I’m the owner.”

Her heart really shouldn’t be pounding in her chest just because the man was preparing to restrain her if she attacked him with deadly, brass force. It wasn’t like she’d never been near a man before, but even her prior intimate

relationships had been cautious endeavors. No man had ever brought to mind the words carnal abandon like this one did. When he looked at her, no one and nothing else existed.

“Before you clock me, would you like to see my license?” he asked while his thumb traced the edge of her collarbone rhythmically. Hypnotically. “Would you?” he prompted in response to her silence.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, unable to concentrate on anything beyond the way her body was responding to his touch. Her skin burned beneath his light caress. Her stomach quivered with an anticipation she had previously only read about. Yes, to whatever you’re asking.

Her state of arousal was not lost on the man towering above her and the answering pleasure in his eyes shook her out of her daze. She stepped back, away from his touch and gave herself a mental shake. This kind of passion had no place in the life she’d built for herself. “I mean no. No, I believe you. You were right. I should go. I can finish everything tomorrow.”

His lids lowered slightly, making his expression unreadable.

“Do you know what I’m thinking?” he asked.

Unless he was also imagining the two of them naked, rolling around on the thick area rug in the living room, she was pretty much stumped. “No,” she croaked.

“I’m starving and I hate to eat alone. I’d be grateful if you joined me for a meal.”

That wouldn’t be wise. There were at least a hundred, maybe a thousand, reasons why she should leave now before she made a fool of herself. Yet, she was tempted.

It was more than the athletic span of his shoulders, more than the strong line of his jaw. She couldn’t even blame the sadness in his eyes, because the exhausted man of earlier had been replaced by a virile male who knew exactly how to get what he wanted—and right now he wanted her.

Every sensible cell in her body urged her to turn tail and run, but wasn’t that what she always did when life offered her something she considered too good to be true? She chose safety and certainty over less reliable dreams and desires.

Just this once she wanted to sample what she’d been missing. Just this once she wouldn’t run.

Well, not immediately, anyway.

She’d share a meal with the near god before her, enjoy the way he made her skin tingle with just a look, and leave before anything happened. He wouldn’t have to eat alone and she could have an hour or so of pretending any of this was real.

“Any problems with Chinese?” she asked as she mentally reviewed the local places she knew would deliver.

The question seemed to jolt him. “Chinese what?”

“Food?” she added helpfully.

“Oh,” he visibly relaxed. “Takeout.”

“Yes, there is a good place right around the corner that I know delivers—unless you’d like me to try to find something else.”

“No.” He shook his head at some private joke. “Sorry, for a minute there I forgot.” Hands in his pockets, he rocked back on his heels, still looking highly amused by his thoughts.

“Forgot what?” she couldn’t help but ask.

With unexpected tenderness, he slid one of her wayward curls behind her ear. “That you’re exactly what I need.” Before she could catch her breath, he stepped back and handed her far too much money, no matter what she ordered. “Order some food while I take a shower.” His knock-’em-dead sex appeal returned as he chuckled and sauntered away, tossing over his shoulder, “I’ve heard I need one.”

Abby fanned her red face with the bills as she watched him climb the stairs two at a time. Not quite shaking herself free of the mental image of Mr. Armani naked beneath the steamy spray of the shower, Abby went in search of her purse and cell phone.

A man that sexy is just trouble.

Luckily it was unlikely that she would ever see him again after today. They would share one quick meal and then she’d head back to Lil and reality.

Back to the quiet, predictable life she’d built for herself.

That thought held less appeal than usual.

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A Second Note to My Readers

The Legacy Collection started my writing career. **Maid for the Billionaire** was written at my kitchen table with my youngest child crawling around at my feet. It is a larger than life, fantasy about a woman who falls for a broken man and pulls him out the darkness. Dominic Corisi is deliciously good at being bad, but he meets his match in Abby. She's as strong and kind as he is angry and hardened. There's a reason so many of my readers say he's their favorite—he was my first. I poured everything I loved about billionaire romances into this book. It's a lighthearted and sexy.

My morally gray Dominic lives on through the other series in my billionaire world. He starts a family of his own but continues to face challenges because that's how life is. How would we ever know to savor our wins if we never lost? How would we grow if we were never challenged?

His story is quite a ride, but so is life.

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More books By Ruth Cardello

The Legacy Collection:

Maid for the Billionaire
For Love or Legacy
Bedding the Billionaire
Saving the Sheikh
Breaching the Billionaire: Alethea's Redemption

The Andrades:

Come Away with Me
Home to Me
Maximum Risk
Somewhere Along the Way
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The Barrington Billionaires:

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A Billionaire for Lexi (Novella with two bonus novellas)
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Reluctantly Romanced
Loving a Landon
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Everette: Driverton 1
Levi: Driverton 2

Ollie: Driverton 3

The Westerlys Series:
In the Heir
Up for Heir
Royal Heir
Hollywood Heir
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Corisi Billionaires:
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The Wild One
The Secret One

The Lost Corisis:
He Said Always
He Said Never
He Said Together
He Said Forever

The Switch Series:
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Out of Love

Twin Find Series:
Strictly Family
Out of Office

Bachelor Tower Series:
Insatiable Bachelor
Impossible Bachelor
Undeniable Bachelor

Lone Star Burn Series:
Taken, Not Spurred

Tycoon Takedown
Taken Home
Taking Charge

A Lighthearted Utensil Romance
Forked
Spooned
Knifed

Temptation Series:
Untouchable Kate

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About the Author

Ruth Cardello was born the youngest of 11 children in a small city in southern Massachusetts. She spent her young adult years moving as far away as she could from her large extended family. She lived in Boston, Paris, Orlando, New York—then came full circle and moved back to New England. She now happily lives one town over from the one she was born in. For her, family trumped the warmer weather and international scene.

She was an educator for 20 years, the last 11 as a kindergarten teacher. When her school district began cutting jobs, Ruth turned a serious eye toward her second love—writing and has never been happier. When she's not writing, you can find her chasing her children around her small farm, riding her horses, or connecting with her readers online.

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